The Califo
Sunday
Magazine

The Longest Walk to America

APRIL 5, 2020

PHOTOGRAPH BY NADJA DROST

"WHEN CAN WE REALLY REST?"

More migrants than ever are crossing the Colombia-Panama border to reach the U.S. Five days inside the Darién Gap, one of the most dangerous journeys in the world.

By Nadja Drost
Photographs by Carlos Villalón, Bruno Federico, and Lisette Poole

Prototype shown. ©2019 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.

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CHALLENGE 5

Ensure all Toyota facilities and processes support a recycling-based society

CHALLENGE 6

Ensure all Toyota facilities and processes operate in harmony with nature

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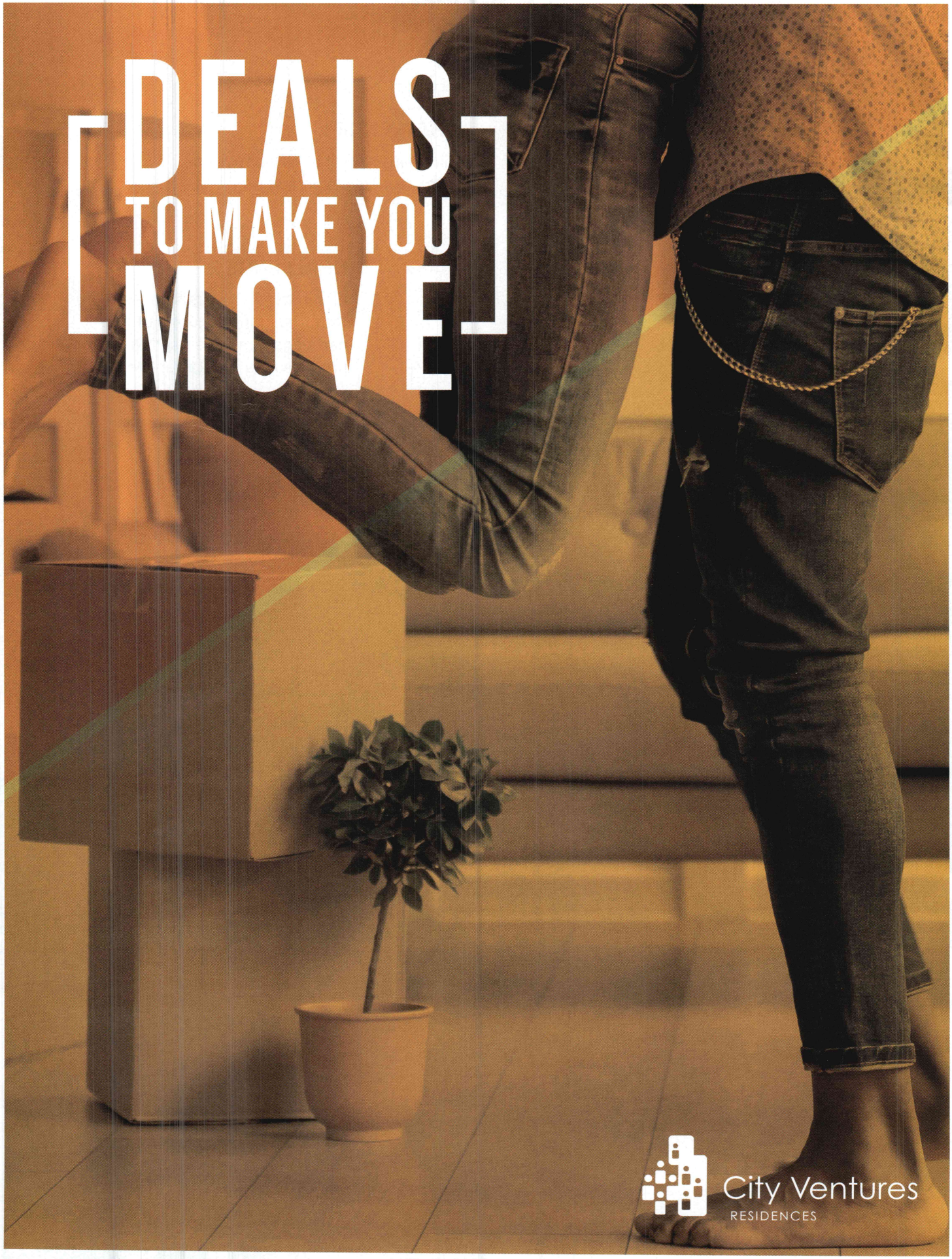
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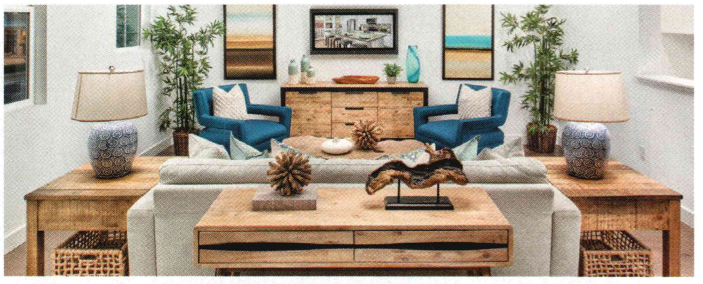

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UBER WARS

Since Uber launched in Argentina in 2016, taxi drivers have come out in force, torching ride-share cars, beating drivers, and shaming passengers. And they're still angry.

By Wes Enzinna
Artwork by Joan Wong
Photographs by Toya Sarno Jordan

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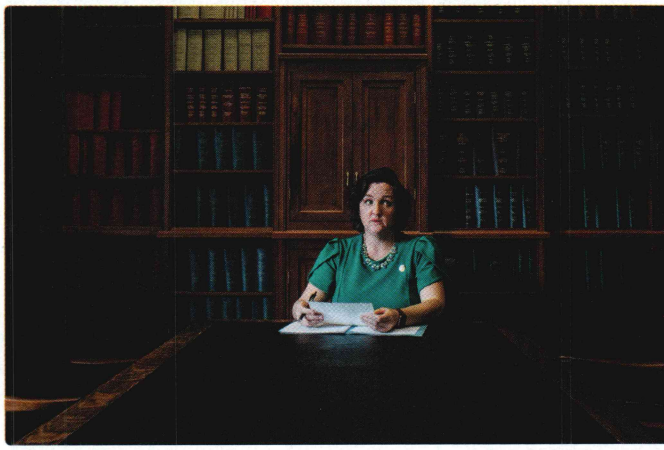
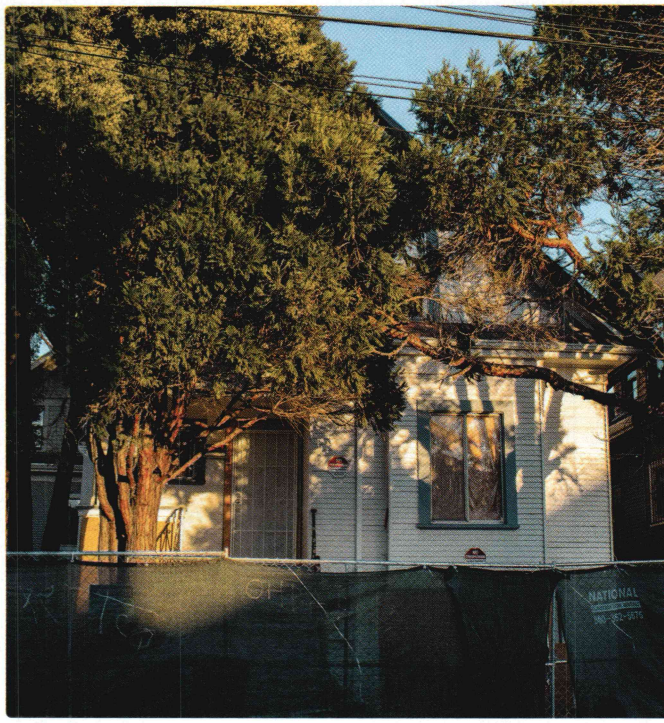
YOUTUBE SENSATION. PROGRESSIVE IN A PURPLE DISTRICT. SINGLE MOM.

What the Democratic Party could learn from first-term Congresswoman Katie Porter

By Rebecca Nelson
Photographs by Clara Mokri





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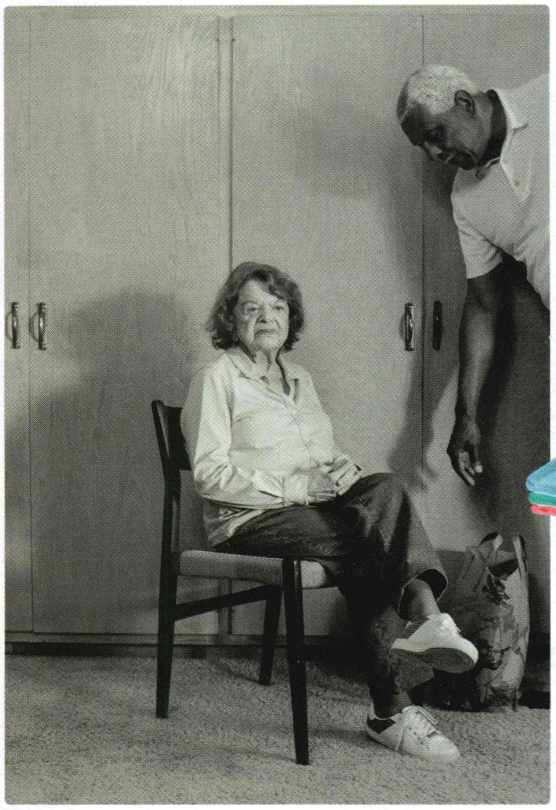
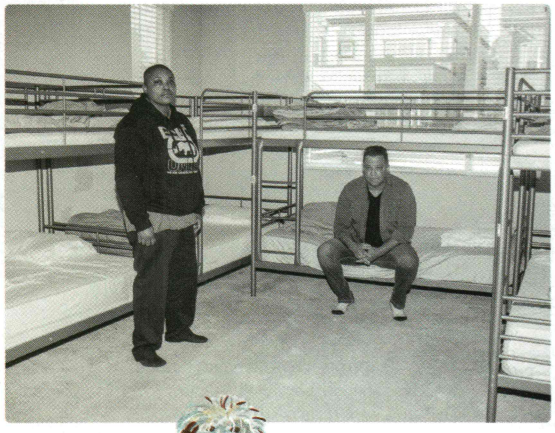
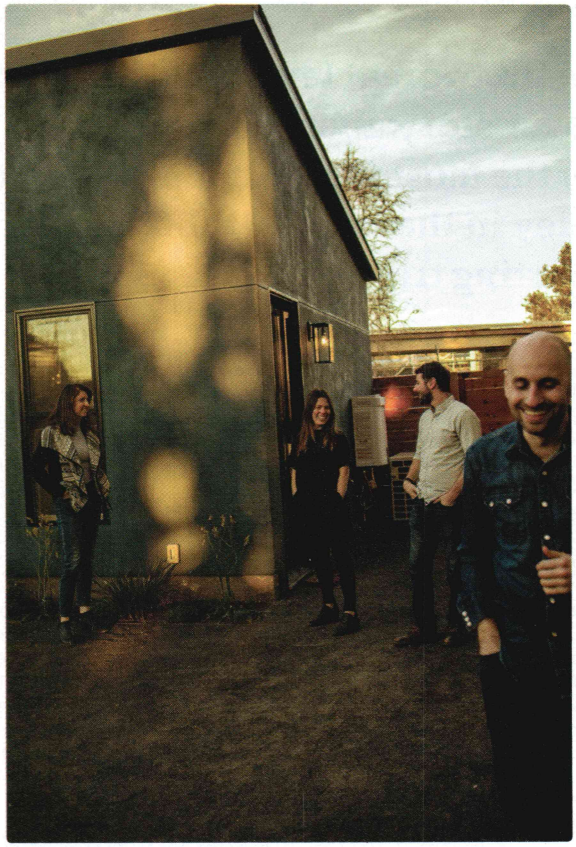
THE HOUSE ON MAGNOLIA STREET

How a group of homeless mothers took on a housing crisis

By Julian Brave NoiseCat
Photographs by Erica Deeman







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ROOMMATES

The creative and sometimes cramped ways people live together

As told to Meher Ahmad, Alessandra Bergamin, and Joy Shan
Photographs by Kovi Konowiecki
Illustrations by Grace Lee

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Snake Person

By Kelsey Wroten

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Nadja Drost went to great lengths to bring you this issue's cover story about the Darién Gap, arguably the most difficult and dangerous migrant journey in the world. I talked to her about her reporting trip.

Photographs by Carlos Villalón

Me: How did you get the idea to go to the Darién Gap in the first place?

Nadja: I lived in Colombia for a decade. I'd known about the route for a long time. It seemed very isolated, very far away. Even Colombians, who are used to danger and conflict, refer to it as a violent backwater. In the past two years, it's really picked up in terms of traffic. Migrants from all over the world are traveling a route they are completely unprepared for.

Me: Were you prepared?

Nadja: My husband [filmmaker Bruno Federico] tried to do this trip a year prior, and it was a complete disaster. I realized, *OK, this is a trip you have to plan for carefully, and you have to assume that everything that can go wrong will go wrong.*

Me: What happened to Bruno?

Nadja: His video camera was ruined by seawater. When he got a second video camera, it was stolen by smugglers. They dumped Bruno and the migrants he was traveling with on a beach at dawn without his equipment, without his knapsack, without anything, except for a telephone. He had to turn back. Then his telephone was stolen. He didn't even have shoes because they were with his knapsack. He took somebody else's rubber boots, which were way too small, and cut the tops off with a machete, so his toes could stick out. The only way to get back to Colombia, if he didn't want to walk all the way through the jungle, was on a garbage boat that went twice a week. So he came back to Colombia sitting on a pile of garbage. Then he was interrogated for hours by the border police. They couldn't understand why he was there, without anything on him, in the middle of the jungle.

Me: So how did you plan for your trip?

Nadja: We knew we needed a guide who was incredibly trustworthy and who knew the Darién Gap like the back of his hand. My friend Carlos Villalón, a photographer, had a guide who he trusted with his life. We hired him and his family. So there were five pretty tough guys with us. And not just any five people — these were locals. They were well-known in the area. They had been smuggling there for a long time. I felt like the most important decision of the trip was who we were going to go with.

Me: What makes a good guide?

Nadja: Somebody who knows the Darién really well, because it's easy to get lost. There are so many different paths, and the paths disappear, and there are so many different rivers. It was really important to have a guide who was a known entity in the area and who would be respected if we had any issues come up. There were so many assaults on the trail. It was chilling to find out that pretty much every group that was ahead of us or behind us had either been robbed or sexually assaulted. There had even been a killing a few days beforehand.

Me: What was it like to walk through the jungle?

Nadja: I was surprised how difficult it was to get any sense of where you were. You could spend hours and hours walking without seeing through the canopy. There was no break in the forest. You were constantly wet. Sometimes we would be crossing rivers 15, 18 times a day, and the water would be anywhere from up to your calves to, sometimes, almost your neck. We were told that we should pack extraordinarily light, so we just had one change of clothes for when we slept. Every morning, you're putting wet clothes back on.

Me: Did you ever wonder if the trip was a mistake?

Nadja: There was a moment near the end of the trip when I realized, *This is now a really bad situation*. People had not eaten for days and days. We have to get out of here by tonight or tomorrow, maximum. But I never doubted that I'd make it out because I was with people who I trusted. And I was hyperaware of how different it was for the migrants. They are so unprepared. They have no idea how long it's going to take. They don't pack enough food. They're terrified.

Me: Was there tension traveling with people when you were better equipped?

Nadja: The difference in food supply was really difficult to navigate. As a journalist, you're not supposed to give things to the people you're interviewing. But it had gotten to a point of potential life or death for some of these people. You're in the middle of nowhere, with over 30 people who haven't eaten in days. Some of them have been robbed of all of their food. There are kids and babies. They would hover over our food, and there were tears coming down their faces, and they would beg for it. So we did share our food with them. Near the end of the trip, we ran out of food for ourselves.

Me: How much farther did you have to go?

Nadja: I would say that we had very little food three days before we ended. We just ate morsels of food on our second-to-last day, and then we had nothing on our last day. On our last night, the only thing that we had left was a kind of oatmeal drink. There was only enough for the children. That was kind of the rule at the end. Only the kids eat.

Me: How did you feel when you made it out?

Nadja: I felt euphoric. It was tempered by the fact that, at that point, I could barely walk. There reaches a certain point where your feet start bleeding either because so many layers of skin have come off or you get these, like, boils on your feet. You see a lot of people walking around really gingerly because it hurts so much. The migrants felt a huge sense of relief when they made it out. That's when they wanted to start talking and sharing their experiences. When you're on the trail, they're just so focused on getting through it, it's difficult to get into long conversations.

Me: What was it like to finally be off the trail?

Nadja: It's surreal to arrive in the first indigenous settlement that you come across because there are 400 inhabitants, and on any given night, at least 500 migrants are staying there. Picture this tiny, tiny settlement in the middle of the jungle — it's probably one of the most multicultural places in the world. I went to buy a bottle of water, and the store owner looked at me and said, "Don't worry. You're safe here." Then she asked me if I was from Syria. This town is used to having migrants arrive in the worst condition. And even though there are all these language barriers, they seem to have developed an understanding of why people are fleeing, and why people are traveling this route, and there's a lot of solidarity with the migrants. If this isolated, tiny, indigenous town in the middle of Panama can get that, then there's kind of no excuse for the rest of the world.

Doug

EDITOR IN CHIEF

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Roommates

California has some of the steepest housing prices in the country. From cities like San Francisco, where the average one-bedroom costs $3,600 — the highest of any city in the U.S. — to rural towns that are plagued by housing shortages, many people can no longer afford to live on their own. We talked to a few who have made the leap to co-living, including a pair of single moms who signed a lease on a house, a family with two kids who moved into a backyard unit, and an Uber driver who crashes in a bunk. They discuss how they learned to share their bathrooms, chores, child care, and lives.

As told to Meher Ahmad, Alessandra Bergamin, and Joy Shan

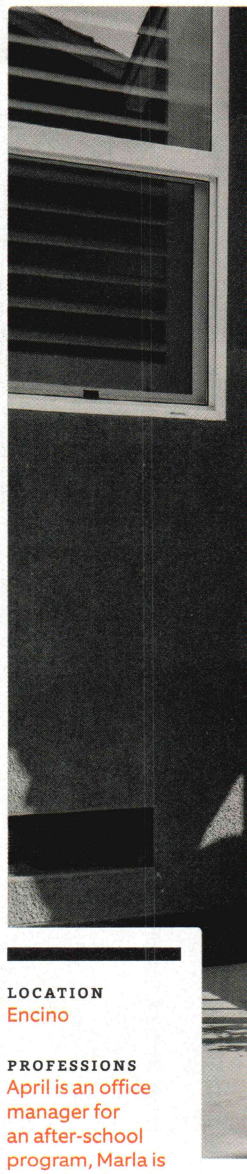
Photographs by Kovi Konowiecki

Illustrations by Grace Lee

Interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

The daughter who lives in her mother's backyard

April Troncoso, 37;
Marla Gould-Lopez (April's mom), 59;
Sue Gould (April's grandmother), 86



APRIL My parents live in the front house, where I grew up, and my husband and two kids and I live in the back house. We used to have a pool in the backyard, but last year we filled it and built this ADU.[1]

Before, the four of us were living in my grandma's condo. I'd been there for ten years, and the homeowner dues kept going up, so my grandma decided to sell it. But housing is crazy out here, and rents had gotten so, so, so high. I don't make a lot of money and was paying for my daughter's UCLA tuition. If it weren't for that condo, I probably wouldn't have been able to live in Encino.

Living on the same property as your mom is either the dream or a nightmare, but it's something we've always wanted. I'm really close with my mom, and even when I didn't live in the backyard, I'd get off work and go to her house and hang out. This ADU is her way of helping us and making living here much more affordable. We still pay rent, but if my mom rented it out to somebody else, she'd get a ton more.

MARLA We moved to our house in 1994, and over the years, we've added on and remodeled. The city is so backlogged with ADUs, we had to wait six months for the Department of Water and Power. Around the same time this was happening, my mom — April's grandmother — had moved into my house.

SUE My daughter, Marla, had an extra bedroom, and she suggested I take it. I was basically living at Fred's house. A lot of women my age live with their boyfriends — it's so much easier than getting married. But I knew that if he knew I was living just with him and didn't have another place, it might freak him out. So I thought I could rent a room from Marla, which would help her out. It would cost much less than rent for an apartment, and I would have an alternative place so Fred would know I wasn't completely dependent on him. Marla's house is probably about 6 miles from Fred's. With L.A. traffic, it's 20 to 25 minutes, but I'm a slow driver.

LOCATION
Encino

PROFESSIONS
April is an office manager for an after-school program, Marla is a paralegal, and Sue is a retired administrative assistant.

PROPERTY
A four-bedroom, 1,900-square-foot house with a three-bedroom, 1,200-square-foot ADU in the backyard

RENT
April's family pays Marla less than $2,000 a month.

April sits on the landing of her home with her husband, Frank, daughter, Alyssa, and son, Michael. Marla (*far right*) stands beside her mother, Sue, who rents a room in the main house.

APRIL We started construction last April and finished in October, and literally the day the paint was dry, we moved in. My mom and I aren't together as much as I thought we'd be. We try to keep it very separate. Like, this is my mom's house, this is my house. My son is 4, and he loves to go over to my mom's every day. But the rule is, he has to go home first and then call Grandma and make sure it's OK. We're two separate households: We don't eat from each other's fridges. We don't cook for each other. We visit, but when we leave her house at the end of the day, we take my son's stuff.

1

Accessory dwelling units (ADUs) are structures that homeowners can build on their lots and rent out to tenants. Last fall, Governor Gavin Newsom signed three bills into law that would make it easier, cheaper, and faster to build these units.

MARLA My grandson enjoys coming over, but when I say, "OK, around 7 o'clock I got to wind down," April will come right at 7 to get him. If I want to go over and ask April something, usually I'll call her. I always knock. I respect that that's her family and her home, but we do share the backyard space, which is their front yard. And they welcome my dogs in their house. →

SUE Marla has two dogs that she worries about, so Fred and I come over almost every day to let them out. I also pick up my mail, and we take all the leftovers, oftentimes spaghetti or matzo ball soup. Marla's a wonderful cook, and I only cook leftovers.

MARLA It's nice to have them there. They pay rent, but their rent won't go up exorbitantly — it's not like an apartment where every year it increases.

APRIL I'm going to die in this house. Moving is horrible, and everything I need is right here. We've talked about, at some point in the future, switching — where I take the front house, my mom gets the back house. But we may never really need to. Our 1,200 square feet is perfect.

The widow and widower who share a house

Shirley Ross, 99;
Scott Kalin, 77

SHIRLEY As I got older, I made the decision to stay in this house rather than go to a facility. My husband died about 15 years ago, so I was living by myself, but I was completely active, and my life was the same as it's always been — I volunteered and attended concerts and visited with friends. When I was 95, I had to stop driving because of vision problems. I was pretty much stranded here, and friends were anxious about me being alone at night.

I realized I needed someone in the house with me, and somebody told me about a home-share program for seniors in Los Angeles. My first requirement was that I needed someone willing to take me to appointments. I've never felt quite secure with cabs — sometimes they're late, and when you have doctors' appointments, you'd like to get to them on time. But I was also looking for someone who could provide some companionship.

Scott's an intelligent man, and we **laugh together**[1] easily. Despite the fact that he's much younger — he's going to be 78 his next birthday — we find a lot to talk about. We have completely different schedules: Scott gets up very early and goes to bed between 9 and 9:30, and in the evenings, I'm ready to go out and do things. But we're constantly talking as we pass each other — about politics, books we've both read, or whatever comes up in daily life.

At the beginning of the week, Scott and I get together, and I give him some idea of what I need to do that week: if I have a physical therapy appointment or am meeting a friend for lunch. I don't plan anything on Tuesdays because he takes a friend of his sister's to dialysis, and he goes to his **bridge lessons**[2] on Saturday. If I'm going to an appointment for an hour, Scott will park somewhere and listen to **audiobooks**[3] in his car. He also helps by shopping for me. When he goes to the store, I give him a list.

We're a very contrasting-looking pair: I'm under 5 feet, and he's over 6 feet and a very good-looking man. I come up a little above his waist. We're the long and short of it.

SCOTT When you meet Shirley, if someone tells you she's 99 years old, you wouldn't ever believe them. We had something in common right away: My wife had died and been the sunshine of my life;

LOCATION
Los Angeles

PROFESSIONS
Shirley is a retired secretary and piano teacher; Scott is a consultant and former real estate investor.

PROPERTY
Three-bedroom, 2,000-square-foot house

RENT
Scott pays Shirley $550 a month in addition to driving her to appointments.

1

"Shirley's a real punner, and I engage with her quite a bit."
SCOTT

2

"For my 77th birthday, my daughter bought me bridge lessons. I've only ever played with my wife, and we did it very nicely. Bridge is a good metaphor for relationships because it's about one-to-one communication — the idea is to speak the language of bridge well to your partner."
SCOTT

3

"My wife lost her vision in 2000 — it was the side effect of a drug the doctor wanted her to try for lupus. We had been bridge players up until then, but Margaret couldn't see anymore, so we started listening to books on tape."
SCOTT

her husband died and was the sunshine of hers.[4] She's lived in this house for 57 years, and her home is filled with memorabilia of her life. I respect and honor that.

My wife, Margaret, was diagnosed with lupus in 1978, and we met in 1980. We were living in San Diego, and we spent most of our money trying to figure out what to do about it. She died of complications in 2013, and I couldn't live in our house anymore. My daughter said, "Come live here," so I moved to Los Angeles. After five years, I told my daughter it was time for me to move on — I paid rent and everything, but I felt like I was taking up all their space. I rarely saw them — they had their own lives, and I felt that I had stayed a little too long.

I had my Social Security and started looking around, but everything was so expensive. I couldn't afford more than $500 or $600 a month. I looked at quite a few places, but most rentals were nowhere near what I could even begin to afford. I tried Craigslist, and a guy told me he had a two-bedroom house in downtown Santa Monica for $1,200, but he was in New Jersey, and if I send him the money, they'd send the keys. It looked like a nice place, so I took a ride over to the address, but then I went to talk to the managers, and they were like, "Are you kidding? You can't even begin to live here for less than $3,500 per month." It was a scam, so I never used Craigslist again.

I applied for the home-share program and got a list of matches. I spoke to one guy, but, I don't know, on the phone he seemed so apprehensive. Just a grumpy old man, so I never called him back. The program manager also gave me the number of somebody in the Valley, but I was never able to reach anyone. And then I called Shirley. She was the third person on that list. She invited me to stay for a week to see if I liked it. The first thing I enjoyed about her home is that it's on a tree-lined street. Even in the winter, when the leaves are not on the trees, it's quite beautiful.

Shirley has appointments that she goes to, but not a lot. She's in a pretty remarkable state of health. She's always gone — at a concert or a chamber[5] music event, and she goes to three operas a year. If she needs to go somewhere, I'll take her. I don't like the idea of a cab coming to get her. Last night, I took her to the house of one of her dozens and dozens of friends for dinner. I dropped her off at 6 and didn't think she'd be gone that long. Well, they must have dropped her back off after 10:30 because I was sound asleep.

Scott and Shirley have been living together for almost a year.

4

"Scott and I both had very good marriages, and I think we understand each other. We can talk about our mates with each other. If I'm watching something on TV that's outdoors and athletic, I might say to Scott, 'I watched something last night about people climbing in the Himalayas, and Ted would've loved to do that!' And Scott will say the same thing, like, 'Margaret would like this, or she wouldn't care for that.'"

SHIRLEY

5

"I used to teach piano, and I've been an amateur musician and played a lot with chamber music groups. I have a piano and harpsichord in my home, but I can no longer read music, so I don't actively play anymore. But I go to the L.A. Philharmonic and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and all these other music series. It makes my life very full and happy."

SHIRLEY

Twelve people trying to avoid the suburbs

Phil Levin, 35; Kristen Berman, 35; Misha Safyan, 32; Lauren Howser, 36; Alex Animashaun, 34

LOCATION
Oakland

PROFESSIONS
Phil is a community planner, Kristen is a behavioral scientist, Misha is an aerospace engineer, Lauren is a nonprofit manager, and Alex is the founder of a fold-up bike company.

PROPERTY
A four-unit apartment building, a five-bedroom house, and a community building with a kitchen and living room

RENT
$1,100-$1,700 per person

PHIL We've seen this pattern with our friends where they have a kid and move out to a place they can all afford, which is usually far away. The drive to find something affordable pushes everyone from a social life in a city to being very dispersed. We started this community to be an alternate option. →

Phil, with one of his roommates in their newly completed community area, which includes a shared kitchen

KRISTEN We have one food budget that everyone contributes to, and that includes our groceries and stuff like toilet paper and paper towels. We leave a little bit of room in the budget, so folks can buy the things that help a house function.

MISHA We have a couple of different communication channels. For more-immediate communication, we use a WhatsApp thread, and then for nonurgent communication, we use Slack, which we subdivide **into a bunch of different channels organized by topic**.[1]

LAUREN This one Slack channel is the thing I tell everybody about when I talk about this house. It's called "I did a thing," and it's basically a place where any time you do something to help the house, whether it's taking out the garbage or cleaning a table, you post it on there. Before I moved in, I had a philosophy of "Well, you should just do things because you want to do them," but what happens with other roommate situations is you start to build resentment. You don't feel acknowledged for doing certain things. When I started posting on "I did a thing," it felt really good.

1 *The roommates use 25-plus Slack channels to talk about everything from what groceries they want to order to how the community might approach parenting in the near future.*

ALEX I'm married. We've been together for over four years. We've lived together before, but it's our first time living in a community. We have our own separate apartment, so at the end of the day or whenever we want, we go home and shut the door, and it's just the two of us. In a way, it's the best of both worlds. It's saved us from arguing, because you don't get stressy with your partner. You've got someone else to chat to. The flip side is that sometimes you have so much fun hanging out with your friends that you don't spend enough time alone with your partner.

KRISTEN Alex makes eggs most mornings. He will post in WhatsApp, "Who wants eggs?" And you just go down to the kitchen. Alex is hilarious. It's like a standup comedy show while he's making you eggs.

ALEX Even though we have a personal kitchen, we barely use it — we always eat in the communal kitchen. We use our personal kitchen to store alcohol and emergency cheese.

PHIL I think people see co-living as a bunch of people living in bad housing for less money, but we live in luxury housing for the cost of normal housing. We have a 7-foot cedar hot tub, a custom gas fire pit, and a stand-alone industrial kitchen. None of us could afford to live in a space like this alone or even as a couple.

ALEX I don't call it a commune. I call it a community. When you say "commune," people are like, "Oh right, you've joined a cult." And I say, "We share food." And they're like, "Do you share income?" I'm like, "No, no, no." But when people visit, they're won over — once they sit in the hot tub for a bit.

The ride-share driver who stays in a crash pad

Genildo Viana, 51

I've been driving for Lyft for four years and Uber for three. I live in Anaheim, in Southern California, and a friend of mine told me that it was much better to work in the Bay Area because you make more money with each ride. Basically, the price per mile up here is 20, 25 percent higher than in Orange County and Los Angeles, plus it's busier. Though there's no point in moving my family because renting in San Francisco is still 100 percent more expensive than where I live.

I started driving in the Bay Area in 2017. I used to stay in a Travelodge with eight other Brazilians. We were sharing one room, and everyone would come from Anaheim to drive for Uber and Lyft. But some of them lost their driver accounts because they did not file their tax returns, and some took other jobs. So eight months ago, I was looking for another place to stay. The hotel was cheap for the eight of us, but expensive for one person.

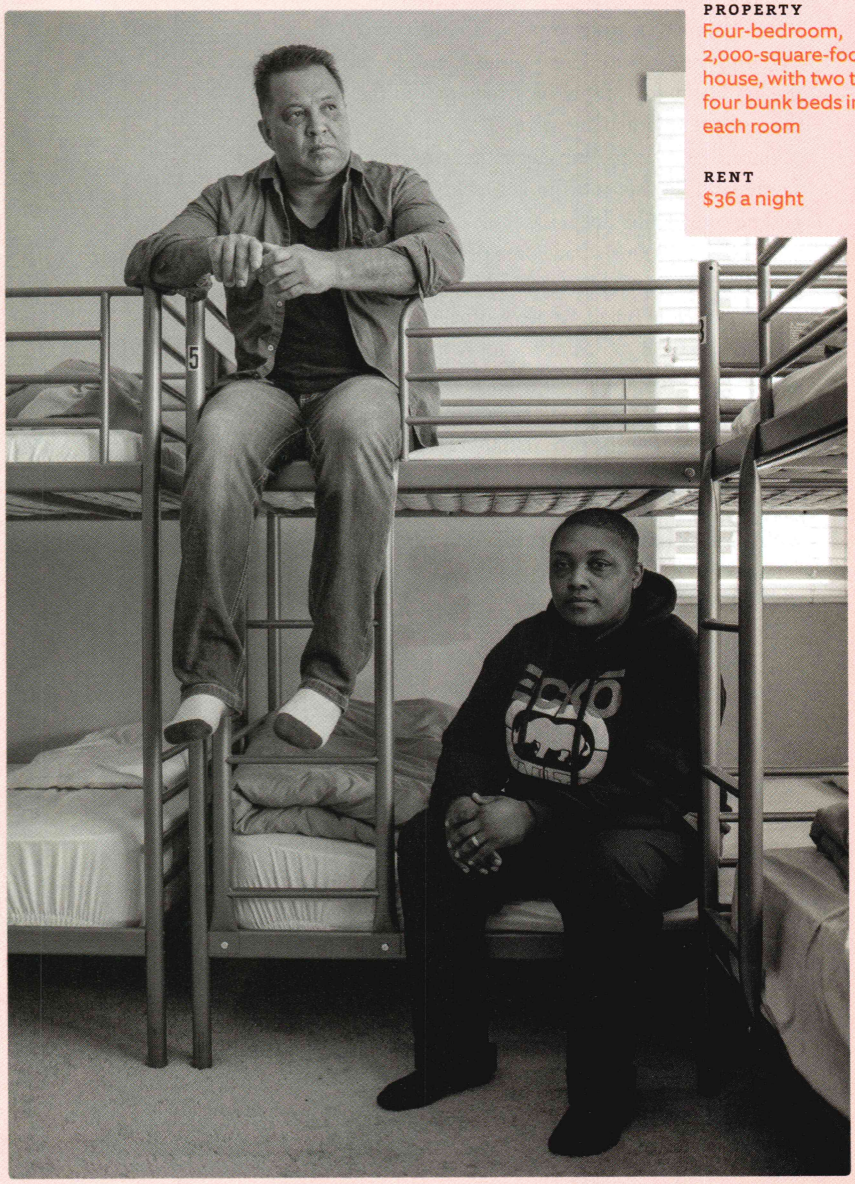
I found this **crash pad**[1] on Airbnb. It's like a hostel. In the last two weeks of every month, I come up from Anaheim and work for 15 days,

LOCATION
Daly City

PROFESSION
Driver for Uber and Lyft

PROPERTY
Four-bedroom, 2,000-square-foot house, with two to four bunk beds in each room

RENT
$36 a night



Genildo (*left*) stays at the crash pad the last two weeks of every month. Shinika Lattin (*right*) is a fellow crasher.

OPPOSITE
Alex and his wife, Erika, in their home, a one-bedroom apartment on the compound

ABOVE
The roommates in an outdoor space between the five-bedroom house and community building

1 *"Crash pads are a widely known thing in the aviation industry. They're short-term rentals for flight attendants and pilots. I was managing my parents' property, and we turned this house into a crash pad. It did well, so we thought,* If flight attendants are willing to live like this, why not the general public?" ZAMEER AZAM, FOUNDER AND CEO OF CRASHPADZ INC.

12 hours a day. Then I go back home. When I come, I bring everything: shirts, underwear, socks. It's cold here, so I always bring sweatpants and a lot of sweaters.

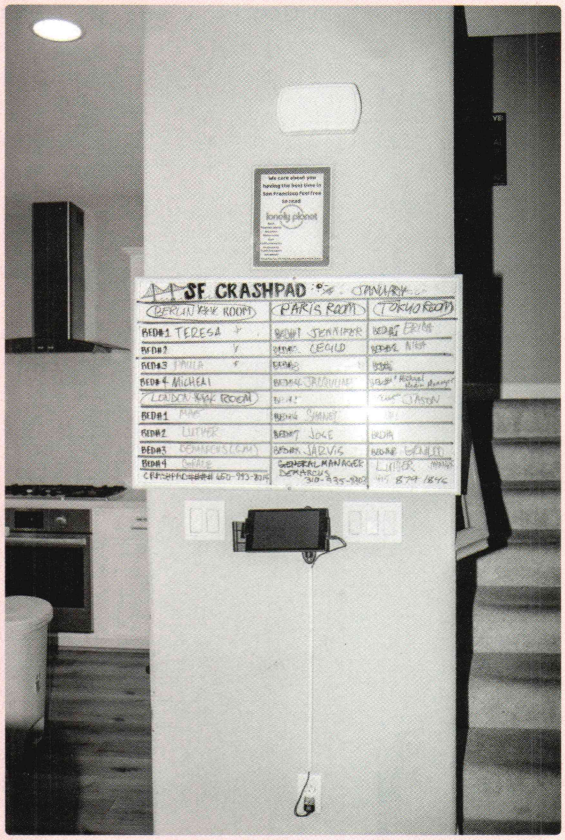
This place is very close to the airport, close to the freeway and expressway, which takes me downtown. In San Francisco, it is very difficult to park a car, and here it is very easy: I have a parking space in front of the house every day. The accommodations are clean and comfortable, and there's breakfast — bread, eggs, sausage, coffee and milk, cereal.

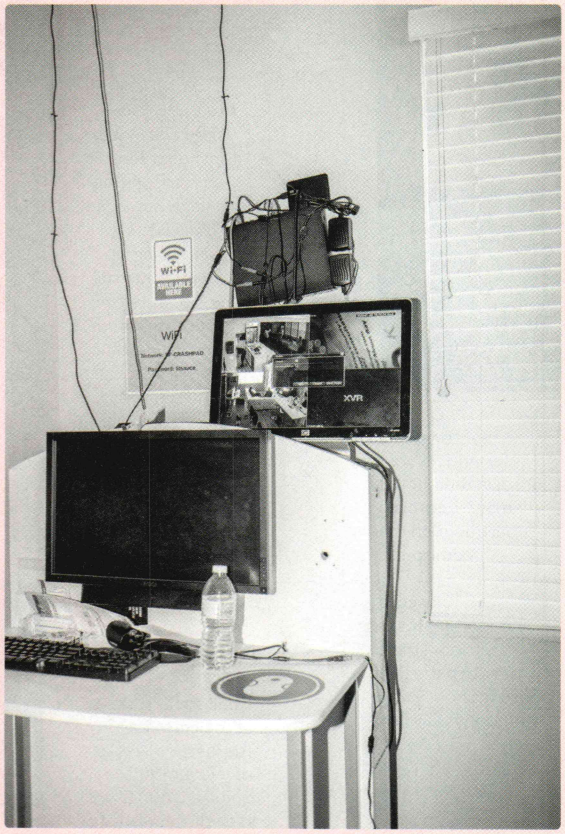
There are bunk beds in each room, but usually only **four or five people every night.**[2] I prefer the bottom bunk because it's easier to get into without disturbing the other people sleeping. When I come back from working around 2 a.m., I go into the bedroom very quietly, and I use the light from my cellphone screen to find the things I use to brush my teeth.

Once, there was an Arab guy in the same room as me, and he was snoring very, very loudly, and nobody could sleep. Last week, there was a guy who apparently had some psychological problems. He kept looking at me like he wanted to fight. I'm from Brazil. I'm from Rio de Janeiro, man. So I told him: "My brother, what is the matter? Do you have a problem with me?" And he kept looking at me. I talked to the staff. They know me. I've been a customer for almost a year. They told him he couldn't stay here anymore — turns out, he had also had a problem with another Brazilian guest that morning. He was looking for a fight. You know, there are crazy people everywhere.

2

"We have three crash pads in the Bay Area, and people come here from all over. Some people are trying to break into the tech industry but can't afford housing. It's hard to find an apartment, and sometimes landlords require three months of rent as a security deposit. So this place is like a stepping stone. We've had cooks, a guy working at a law firm, a guy who works for Postmates, a guy working at Salesforce. We have construction workers who come in Sunday night and leave Friday night."
ZAMEER



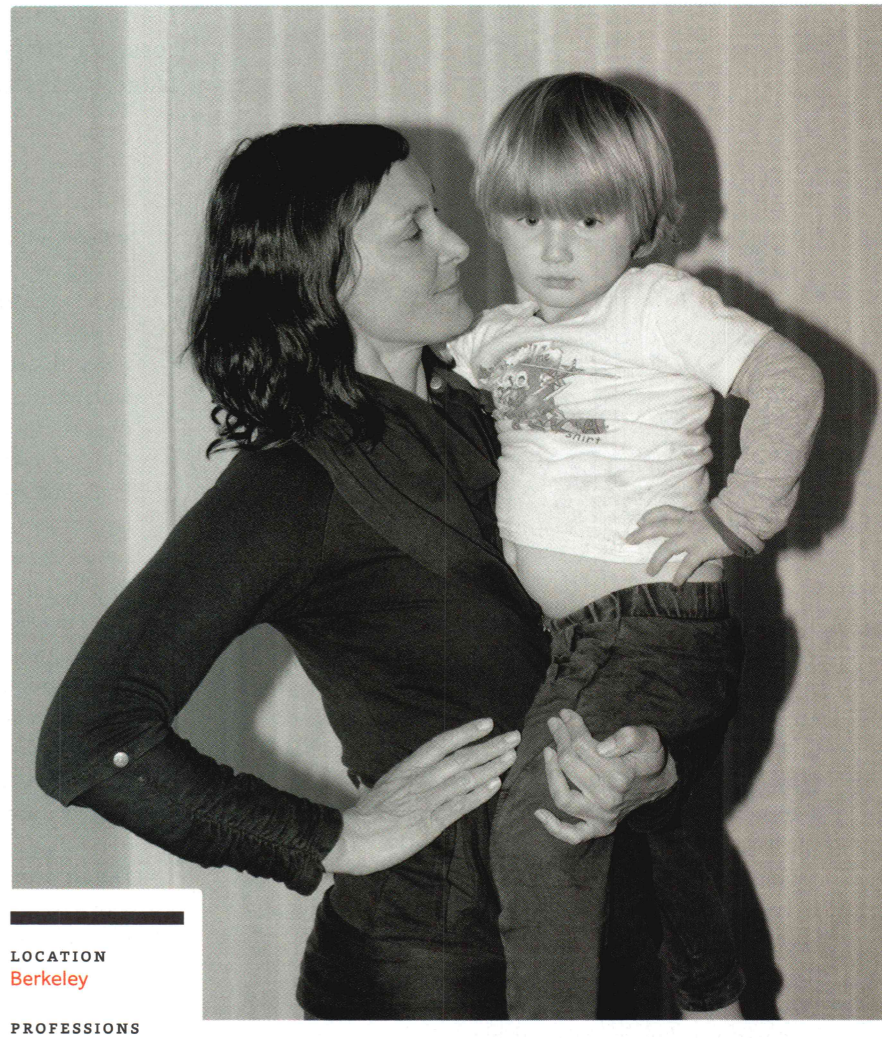


TOP
The crash-pad managers use a whiteboard to distribute rooms and beds.

BOTTOM
Security cameras monitor the common areas.

Two single moms who split rent with two single men

Meridel Tobias, 41;
Audree Halasz, 48;
Daniel Jubelirer, 27



LOCATION
Berkeley

PROFESSIONS
Meridel is a marriage and family therapist, Audree owns a dog-walking business, and Daniel is a life and leadership coach.

PROPERTY
Three-bedroom, 2,200-square-foot house

RENT
$900-$2,000 per person

MERIDEL It's like a love story in which we're not romantically involved. Last spring, after my divorce, I was looking for an apartment for me and my kids that would be close to the house I own with my ex. We bought our house in 2013, and since we've been living there, rents have gone up really, really high, and I was looking at small two-bedrooms for amounts that would've been financially uncomfortable. I thought, *Maybe there's another mom somewhere who could potentially move in.*

AUDREE I was living in an arrangement similar to this one, but I was the only one with a child. I wanted to live with another parent. I wanted to let my kid have a sibling-like experience and just support one another in the day to day. It took about ten months to find the right people and the place. One of the people who moved with us was Ian, a friend from my last house. Then I got introduced to Meridel through a friend.

MERIDEL Audree and I met up at a taqueria. We brought our kids — we wanted to get to know each other's parenting styles and make sure our kids were getting along. Audree saw my daughter, Becky, and said, "I recognize her from somewhere!" She realized she'd done a visit to my daughter's preschool. So Audree had actually met my daughter before she met me.

There was another mom there with her kid. We were thinking we could all talk and see if there's room for her, too. But one of the kids — I'm pretty sure it was my son — spilled water everywhere. Her kid got upset, and the mom seemed really anxious. She just took her kid and left.

After Audree found the place, we had space for another roommate, so we went to Craigslist. That's how we met Daniel.

DANIEL I'm not in a place in my life where I can buy a house. I like community housing. For most of my time in the Bay Area, I lived in a co-op that was formed six years ago by a group of people who were all training to be life coaches.

I decided to move out of there last year because it was near the highway, and I have sensitivity to noise when I sleep. I visited 25 different houses, and they were all out of my budget or had 20 other people looking at them. I had coffee with Meridel and Audree and really liked them. One thing that stood out to me was when I asked Audree about how she'd like for me and her son, Xaivi, to interact, she said, "I'd love for you to relate how you want to relate." Some parents are fearful of other adults interacting with their kids, but Audree seemed open to us having a real relationship. →

Audree with her son, Xaivi. "Having space is hard if you're a solo mom," Audree says. "Xaivi's got playmates here, and that's been really helpful."

The mothers try to gather their kids for dinner once a week.

AUDREE Meridel and I are the only names on the lease. Co-housing discrimination is a thing: I have a group of friends who looked in Oakland for a year and kept getting turned down. It's a competitive market, and you have to pick your battles, so we chose to have fewer people on the lease.

I didn't have any concerns about Xaivi living with new adults. He doesn't have a dad, so having other male figures is important for me. Daniel plays guitar, so I love that he's here, and Xaivi gets to see that. On some Wednesday nights, Ian will watch him, and he's put him to sleep before. He's like our godsend uncle.

MERIDEL I'll have had some power struggle with my kid in the living room, and I can go into the kitchen and roll my eyes, and Audree's like, "Totally." Audree does that with me, too. She'll say, "What do I do with this thing with Xaivi?" And I'm like, "I know, girl."

DANIEL As far as my interactions with the kids go, sometimes it looks like me having my earbuds in, being annoyed, and tuning them out. Sometimes it's me playing with the kids so their moms can talk. One morning, all three kids were home, and I was telling them stories that I was making up in that moment. They got really into it, but I had to leave an hour later. They were like, "No, stay!"

MERIDEL Becky really took to him. She always asks, "Where's Daniel?"

The grandmother who lives with her two daughters and six grandchildren

Maria Salazar, 58;
Jesse, 13; Diego, 13; Sammy, 20;
Isaac, 7 (Maria's grandchildren)

MARIA My daughter Mayra is deaf and mute, and her husband passed away five years ago, so I moved in with her and her children — she has four now. She doesn't work because of her disability, and I don't make much working as a housecleaner, about $1,400 a month. We'd been looking for a place to live for over a year when our previous landlord sold the house we were living in. I can't afford a place that's more than $700 or $800. With utilities, I'll be spending close to $1,000, and we need money for food and household expenses. I tried to find a place in our budget, but the houses are **too expensive in this area right now**.[1] Anything we can afford is small, which is fine, but when I ask if they'd accept four kids, the landlords hung up on me.

We moved in with my other daughter, her husband, and their two kids about a year ago after **we couldn't find anything**.[2] In one big room, we have four beds: a queen bed where me, my daughter, and her two toddler-aged boys sleep, a twin where one teenager sleeps, and two more in a corner where two of the boys sleep. The oldest boy sleeps in the living room, and my daughter and her husband sleep in one room. We have only one bathroom.

JESSE I have an alarm clock, but I always turn it off and sleep more, so my cousin Diego wakes me up. Sometimes he throws stuff on me to wake me up.

DIEGO Before everyone moved in, our house was more peaceful. Now it's loud and messy, lots of crying because of the babies. When they cry at night, I just stay asleep — I'm used to it. I like to wake up early in the mornings to use the bathroom and get ready. I like when it's quiet, and I can watch my favorite anime show.

SAMMY My bed is right in front of the PlayStation and the TV. I even play when I wake up in the morning sometimes.

ISAAC I do my homework on the dining table or on my bed because I can't hear the PlayStation from there. Me and my brothers and cousins play Minecraft together — we each play on our own phones, and sometimes Sammy bursts into the room where we sleep if we kill him in the game. When we first moved into this house, I didn't know how long we would stay. My grandma says we'll leave soon.

1 *Merced has seen some of the fastest housing price increases in the Central Valley. The shortage is partly driven by an influx of students to UC Merced.*

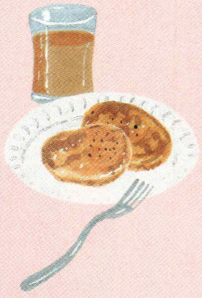
2 *Rental vacancies in Merced hover at less than 1 percent.*

LOCATION
Merced

PROFESSION
Maria is a housecleaner.

PROPERTY
Three-bedroom, 1,000-square-foot ranch house

RENT
$700 total



TOP
Maria, her daughter Mayra, and her two youngest grandsons sleep on a queen-size bed together. Maria says she's usually the last to fall asleep.

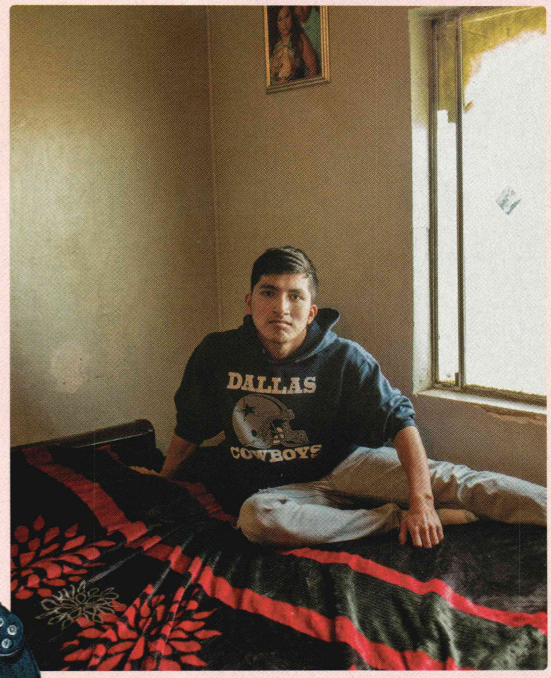
BOTTOM
Sammy sleeps in the living room. During the day, his bed serves as the couch.

3 *A new 119-unit building for low-income housing is in the works.*

MARIA On the weekends, I cook breakfast for the kids. I always make pancakes. Even though there are a lot of us, I insist we eat together. Sometimes we don't all fit at the table, so we pull up chairs.

The bathroom is busy in the morning, but I think it's worse at night because we're all here. Two of the kids take a long time, so I have to keep knocking on the door to hurry them up. By 10 p.m., the kids are usually in bed. Once everyone is asleep, I like to watch telenovelas on my iPad with my headphones on.

I have been looking for a place for over a year. I applied for **low-income housing, and they put me on a waiting list.**[3] I still haven't heard back. Every time I check, they say they don't have anything available. I'm hoping we can find something soon. Even though we've been pushed together, I am happy I can be with my family. They never make me tired. I like to hug them before we fall asleep.



"When can we really rest?"

More migrants than ever are crossing the Colombia-Panama border to reach the U.S.

Five days inside the Darién Gap, one of the most dangerous journeys in the world.

BY NADJA DROST

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CARLOS VILLALÓN AND BRUNO FEDERICO

Dusk

was descending through the rainforest when the Cameroonians and Pakistanis stumbled into the campsite. They were in their 20s and 30s and loaded down with knapsacks, tents, and shoulder bags. Mud covered their rubber boots. They looked dazed, trying to make out who was occupying the small clearing that had just opened up in front of them.

The site was not much to speak of, a patch of dirt dotted with stumps and discarded pieces of tent fabric. Several men lay in hammocks that hung between slender trees. The one extravagance was a kitchen, shaded by a tarp and consisting of a rough wooden table, a couple of open fire pits, and some blackened pots that rested on rocks.

The four Pakistani men, the first to arrive, were breathing hard. Most of the Cameroonians — there were 18 in all — made straight for a nearby river, their plastic passport holders dangling in the water as they doused their faces. Some stripped off their clothes and washed themselves. A woman named Sandra stood motionless, in obvious pain. Twenty-three years old, she was one of the youngest in the group. Tight ringlets, their ends a rusty blond from old highlights, framed her face. Wrenching off her knapsack, she sat down on a log and hugged her knees. She was worried about her friend Benita, who had twisted her knee the day before and had been struggling. When Benita limped in, leaning heavily on a thick branch, Sandra looked up. "How many more days?" she asked to no one in particular.

Sandra and her group had set out two days earlier from northwestern Colombia and had walked at least 15 miles on steep, unforgiving trails across a swath of land known as the Darién Gap. Straddling the border of Panama and Colombia, the Gap is approximately 10,000 square miles of dense, mountainous rainforest and marshland. There are no roads. The

This story was produced in partnership with the Pulitzer Center.

only way around it is by sea. It has long been considered one of the most dangerous regions in the world: a corridor for drug trafficking and home to jaguars and venomous snakes. This has not stopped thousands of migrants from Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Caribbean from traversing it in the hope that they will reach the United States.

The Pakistanis and Cameroonians were brought to the camp by a smuggler they'd hired in Colombia. Smugglers use the camp as a way station, a place to hand off migrants to other coyotes who will guide them deeper into Panama. This was all part of an elaborate, clandestine system that most migrants barely understand. Many have no idea how long it takes to cross the Darién.

Wajid *(bottom left)* **and the Cameroonians on the trail**

The Cameroonians had gone through almost all of their food, and they started to crowd around the kitchen. Rice and chicken in the middle of a rainforest was an unexpected luxury. When some grabbed plates, a smuggler slapped their hands. The cook held up five fingers: "Five dollar!" A Cameroonian man pulled out a $100

bill and paid for Sandra's and Benita's plates. Everyone called him "Pastor." "I like to talk about God a lot," he explained, laughing. Before he left Cameroon, he said that God had revealed to him that the journey would not be easy and that he would need to shepherd his people. They would encounter armed robbers, and the armed robbers would attack many groups but not Pastor's. They would see many dead bodies, but he should not be afraid. Pastor was compact and muscular and over the previous two days had become one of the group's leaders. Pastor said everyone now needed to eat and rest.

Sandra wanted to know: "When can we really rest?" No one had an answer. She asked for pills, any kind of pills, not for something in particular but because she hurt all over. Benita, who was sitting beside her, could feel her leg stiffening. One of the Pakistanis offered camphor ointment that a Cameroonian started rubbing onto her leg. As he reached her knee, Benita cried out and slid down from the log, her companions pinning her as she writhed in pain. Hours later, when everyone was asleep, one tent glowed orange. Pastor's silhouette appeared, kneeling in prayer.

FROM THE TIME OF the Spanish, explorers, engineers, developers, and adventurers have tried to conquer the Darién. All have failed. As wild as the Darién is, it's never been void of humanity — indigenous peoples have been living there for thousands of years. An attempt to establish a Scottish colony in the late-17th century ended up almost bankrupting Scotland. The area would later draw the attention of surveyors who assumed, because the isthmus is only 110 miles wide, that it was a logical place to cut a canal that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific. The Darién continued to prove inhospitable. In 1854, a party of U.S. Navy engineers got lost looking for a canal route, seven of them starving to death. When the Pan-American Highway was constructed in the 1930s, the only piece never completed was the Darién. The missing 66-mile link came to be known as the "Darién Gap."

Starting in the 1990s, the Darién provided cover for Marxist FARC guerrillas and a faction of the right-wing paramilitary. Because it sits on the border, the Darién was an important route to move weapons and drugs, and its isolation and absence of government authority made it an ideal place for armed groups to operate. In addition to fighting one another, these groups punished anyone who ventured in without permission. Over the years, missionaries, orchid hunters, and backpackers were kidnapped, and, in 2013, FARC rebels killed a Swedish tourist they suspected of being a spy. Today, the FARC has retreated from the Darién, thanks to its peace deal with the Colombian government. The paramilitary officially demobilized in the mid-2000s, but many of its

ABOVE

Sandra *(second from left)* **had been told the journey through the Gap would be simple; Benita, who had twisted her knee early on, being pulled up a step.**

From the time of the Spanish, explorers, engineers, developers, and adventurers have tried to conquer the Darién. All have failed.

factions reorganized into drug-trafficking groups. The largest of these, the Urabeños, now controls entire sections of the Gap.

The Cameroonians and Pakistanis didn't know any of this history when they arrived in South America. All they knew was that to get to the United States they had to first cross into Panama, and the only way to do that was through the Darién.

The Cameroonians belonged to the country's English-speaking minority and were fleeing one of the world's most underreported terror campaigns. Tensions between the Francophone-led government and its English-speaking citizens date back to independence, but they reached a new pitch in 2016, after the government imposed French-speaking teachers and lawyers on Anglophone schools and courts. Peaceful protests were met with military repression, which gave birth to armed insurgency, which led to further government repression, a cycle of violence that continues unabated. According to Human Rights Watch, security forces have committed torture, carried out extrajudicial killings, and torched scores of villages. By the end of last year, the conflict had left an estimated 3,000 dead and displaced about 700,000 Cameroonians in the English-speaking regions.

Almost every one of the Cameroonians who arrived at the smugglers' campsite had experienced horrific violence. Sandra was at home eating dinner with her family when the military broke open the door and dragged out her brother and shot him. When they set her house ablaze, she ran into the bush, where government forces raped her. It was the last time she saw her family. Security forces also killed Benita's brother. She was in the room next door when she heard the gunshot. She rushed in and found him lying on the floor, his head "scattered," she said. "I tried to gather his head," but there was no way. A few weeks later, security forces came to the house again. This time she was not there, and she knew she had to flee, leaving her three children behind. Pastor lived in the bush for two months with his 5-year-old son after his mother and father were killed. While searching for food, he

BELOW

From left: Wajid, Waseem, Nihal, and Hussain had watched YouTube videos before the trip and made sure to pack cookies, nuts, and Red Bulls.

Cameroonian security forces also killed Benita's brother. She was in the room next door when she heard the gunshot.

was swept up by the military and, although he managed to escape from jail, he never saw his son again.

With Europe and the United States taking strict measures to keep out migrants and asylum-seekers, finding safety abroad had become more difficult. But there was still a way to get to the United States. A few South American countries, notably Ecuador and Brazil, had relatively lax entry requirements, busting open a route through the Americas. Unlike the passage across the Mediterranean, whose dangers were well-known, few images existed on the internet of migrants who had drowned or been murdered crossing the Darién Gap. Benita decided to fly to Ecuador but had no idea what she would do after she arrived. On a layover in the Istanbul Airport, she found some Cameroonians who told her that after Ecuador, they were planning to go to the U.S. "I asked them, 'Can you walk there?' They said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Huh? So after Ecuador is the United States?' They said, 'Yes, you will just walk. You pass through the river, you enter the United States.'"

When Benita arrived in Ecuador, she met Pastor and Sandra and found that many Cameroonians were armed with tips on how to get to Colombia's northern coast: which towns to hit, where to switch buses. As more and more Cameroonians fled the country, this kind of information had gone global, one WhatsApp message at a time, as people were getting pushed out of places like Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, India, Bangladesh, and Eritrea. In 2019, Panamanian authorities counted almost 24,000 migrants, more than three times as many who had crossed in 2017. While more than half were from Haiti, the number of Africans and South Asians has continued to grow significantly.

The four Pakistanis got together for the first time in a bus station in Lima, Peru. They had been making plans to go through the Darién for weeks. Waseem and Hussain had arrived from Pakistan, Nihal and Wajid from Chile, where they had worked for a year. Three of them came from the Swat, the region near the border with Afghanistan. They had lived through the violent years of the Taliban and the military offensives to root it out,

A group of Bangladeshis crossing a river

and they were eager to move to a safer country.

Through family and friends, Waseem was the common connection among the four. He was fair-skinned, with a neatly trimmed beard and light green eyes and not unaware of his good looks. South America and the Darién had never occurred to him. When he left Pakistan, he flew to Dubai with the hope of getting a visa for Europe. He soon realized that was unlikely — few European countries were welcoming 23-year-old Pakistani men without a job lined up — so he settled on a country that would give him a visa: Peru. When his flight landed in Lima, however, immigration authorities informed him that his visa was invalid and that they would be sending him back to Pakistan. According to Waseem, he immediately fainted and, upon waking in a hospital, told security officials he would rather stay at the

airport than return home. Twenty-two days later, authorities granted him a temporary visa, and soon he was living with the Peruvian woman who had guarded him at the airport and talking to his friends about meeting up and heading for the U.S.

FOR MIGRANTS TRAVELING north through Colombia, the road ends in Necoclí, a port town on Colombia's Caribbean coast. From there, boats shuttle across a bay to Capurganá, a sleepy tourist town that serves as the gateway to the Darién Gap. It was on one of these boats in late summer that the Pakistanis and Cameroonians met and talked about what lay ahead. They were sure they could traverse the Darién swiftly — they were young; they had brought no kids. As the boat skipped along the waves, they decided to cross the Darién together.

When migrants get off the boat at Capurganá, young men pitch them like tour operators: "Amigo, amigo. Panamá, Panamá." Along the boardwalk, restaurants try to outdo one another, blasting music from loudspeakers. Massage tables and plastic chairs dot the beach. The same shops that are stuffed with flip-flops, snorkeling masks, and bathing suits also sell machetes and tents. There is an easy rhythm to the place: Tourists come; drugs and migrants leave.

The Urabeños, the narco-paramilitary group that dominates the region, tolerate the migrants as long as they don't interfere with their drug trafficking or draw the attention of authorities. It is an uneasy coexistence, and when the flow of migrants threatens their activities, the Urabeños have taken action. According to locals, the group killed a smuggler to make an example of him after some

In 2019, Panamanian authorities counted almost 24,000 migrants, more than three times as many who had crossed in 2017.

coyotes defied a ban the Urabeños had temporarily imposed. Recently, word spread, they had executed a smuggler for raping two Cuban migrants. It's hard to know how far the Urabeños' control extends into Panama, but because that control includes the northern entrance into the Darién, the group dictates who enters and who doesn't and how much they have to pay.

Upon arriving in Capurganá, some migrants think they can take a bus or boat to Panama and are shocked to find out they have to walk. Many haul trolley suitcases or duffel bags so stuffed they can't be zipped closed or appear in winter jackets with fur-trimmed hoods, in leather shoes, or dress pants. By contrast, the Pakistanis had found videos on YouTube that showed people trudging through mud and had bought rubber boots and rain ponchos and made sure to pack cookies, dried fruit, nuts, and a liter of milk each.

Most don't speak Spanish and are at the mercy of smugglers. The Cameroonians had come with a reference and a photo for a man named Junior, whom they found soon after they landed. For $50 a head, he would fix them up with guides, as the smugglers prefer to be called, who would bring them into the jungle and across the border to a place he simply referred to as *"el río,"* the river. There was just one more charge, Junior explained — a mandatory $20-per-person fee to ensure their safety from the "mafia." The Cameroonians didn't know who the mafia was, but they had already heard that the bandits in the Darién killed anyone who didn't give up their possessions. So everyone paid up. Junior then took a photo of each Cameroonian and Pakistani, and, with the transaction complete, they headed out of Capurganá, the smugglers leading the way. Some time later, they reached a gate. A group of men counted them off, one by one, and ushered the 22 migrants into the rainforest.

ON THE MORNING after the Cameroonians and Pakistanis arrived at the smugglers' camp, they woke up to torrential rain, which was turning the ground into a field of puddles. Wind ripped tarps from their fastenings, causing them to flail. Wajid, one of the Pakistanis, clutching an airline blanket around his neck, sprang up to futilely grab the corners of the kitchen tarp. Others scrambled after tents.

The constant wetness was one of the hardest things for the group to get used to. Dampness from exertion and humidity, from brushing up against leaves, seeped into everything — sweaters, underwear, blankets. It brought a chill to the nights. Because the group crossed so many rivers, everyone was always wet up to their waist. Their boots would fill with water, and even after draining them, their feet would slosh around. The skin on their soles sometimes peeled off until they bled.

Rather than hiring a new guide, the group had decided to stick with the same one who had taken them to the camp. He had shown unexpected consideration, hoisting them up over tree roots and occasionally carrying a bag. For $10 per person, he would lead them another day. There were only two ways to make money, he said, if you were a 30-year-old and lived near Capurganá: carry drugs or carry migrants. He opted for migrants. His brother had run cocaine on trails like this and been shot by the Panamanian police and now lay in an unmarked grave. In the two years he had been guiding migrants, he said he had seen suffering that would "break anyone's soul."

After the storm subsided, the group set off, many in pink, yellow, and blue ponchos; they looked like candy drops. Some of the smugglers who had been waiting around the camp decided to join the caravan. They knew the Cameroonians and Pakistanis would tire out, and they buzzed around, offering to carry their bags for a fee. The trail leading out of the camp went straight up a mountain, one slope turning into another and then another. This went on until midafternoon, everyone trudging past ferns and hanging vines on a trail that was like a shaft walled in green. Through the canopy of trees, the sky would appear intermittently in small patches. When the Pakistanis reached a clearing, they cracked open a Red Bull as they waited for the others to catch up. Sweating under her plastic rain pants, Sandra soon joined them. She had left Africa under the impression that the journey to the U.S. would be simple, that she would be able to do it alone. "I never knew that you will climb mountains upon mountains upon mountains," she said.

The smugglers' camp on the third morning

Benita lurched in last, supported by Pastor and a lithe Cameroonian named Vitalis. Barely able to bend

her knee, she moved by swiveling her hip. This maneuver didn't work when the trail turned steep. Then she had to bend her knee, stake her rubber boot, and lift herself up, which sent shards of pain shooting up her leg, and she would let out a howl. Pastor would push her from behind while Vitalis would pull her up by her hand. They did this for hours. Whimper, cry, heave.

The descent was even harder. The migrants would slip and lose their balance, grabbing at a branch or a vine to break their slide. Somewhere near the top of the mountain, Benita had started to feel as though her leg had separated from her body. She now had the vacant expression of someone who was disassociating from the pain. A guide called Camilo* watched her struggle. "This is how it starts," he said. "Most people who injure themselves die."

The narco-paramilitary group that dominates the region tolerates the migrants as long as they don't interfere with its drug trafficking.

BELOW
Boots and shoes can get so wet that the skin on the soles of feet starts to peel off.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUNO FEDERICO

Down a nearby ravine, a migrant he had known lay at the bottom of a tree. Flesh still covered parts of the skeleton; bits of fabric clung to his pelvis. Camilo referred to the dead man as the "Hindu," which is what smugglers called anyone they decided was from South Asia. The Hindu had arrived at the smugglers' camp two months earlier in terrible condition, and Camilo said he advised him not to keep going. But after a few days, the man decided to continue. Halfway up the mountain, he couldn't go on. He had an injury similar to Benita's, Camilo said.

Over the next two weeks, smugglers and migrants would see the man along the trail, crawling and resting, and would give him food and water. One day, a smuggler passing through heard the man calling for help — he had fallen down an embankment. The smuggler, according to Camilo, couldn't lift him out on his own and came back some time later with others to carry the man to their camp, but when they called out for him, there was no answer.

AMONG THE four of them, the Pakistanis could manage basic English and Spanish and could communicate somewhat with the guides and understand what was going on. They rarely got despondent, and, while hiking, their conversations would often turn to the U.S. — how they were going to get there and what life must be like. The Pakistanis couldn't stop and perform their afternoon prayers on the trail, but at camp they used a river for ablution and airline blankets for mats. They asked God to protect them, Waseem said, from all forms of harm, "whether human or animal." At night, the four

*Not his real name.

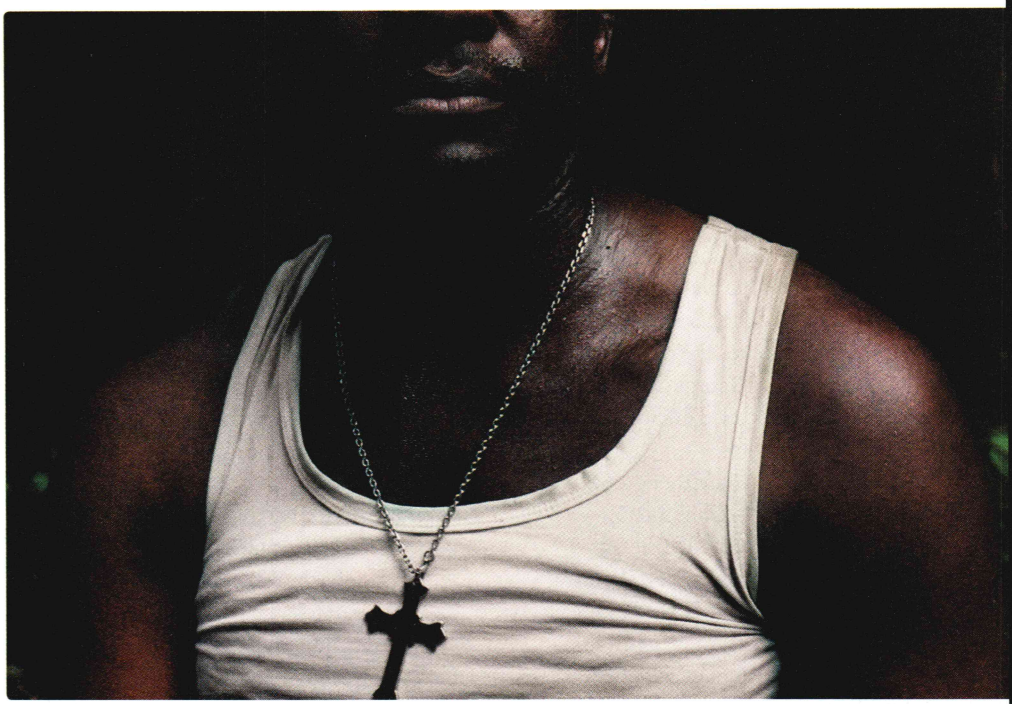
crowded into their tent and could always be heard bantering. Waseem jeered the others for having brought only one tent for all of them; they teased him for talking like he was the oldest.

At one point, a group of men came up from behind the migrants, thrashing through the underbrush in their rubber boots. They were swift and agile; it was clear they had taken this route many times. They were carrying boxed backpacks loaded with bricks of cocaine and slowed only to slap hands with a guide. The Pakistanis were so focused on the trail, they didn't even look up when the drug runners passed them.

When the Pakistanis reached the river at the bottom of the mountain, they dipped their bottles and drank with a fever — it was the first time they could refill them. It was a beautiful spot. The river was narrow, and the canopy opened up just a slit, enough to let the late-afternoon sun fall through the bowed branches, dappling the water. The river ran gentle and shallow here, and the Pakistanis took off their socks and let the water wash over their feet.

Sandra removed her rubber boots and chugged back an orange powdered drink. No one had eaten anything all day, and the Pakistanis and Cameroonians were passing around crackers and nuts. One of the guides beckoned to Sandra to give him nuts. She guffawed at the audacity of his demand and held up two fingers, signaling $2. Despite his pleas, she insisted, and he zipped open his hip-pack to get the cash.

The Cameroonians had thrown away much of their food the first night on the trail. Pastor acknowledged the decision was rash but explained that the first day had been so arduous that everyone just assumed they were close to their destination. It was as if by refusing to accept how long the journey was, the Cameroonians could will it shorter. They had even gotten rid of a Cameroonian staple called *garri*, which Benita, Vitalis, and others had brought. Made from ground cassava root, it's what sustained many in the group when they were hiding from security forces in the bush.



ABOVE
George, who had injured his ankle, fell behind the group.

For the guides, the river was the end of the line. The chances of being apprehended by border police increased the longer they stuck around on the Panamanian side, and the consequences were extreme — years in prison for human smuggling. The guides told the migrants to follow the river, wished them good luck, and turned back up the mountain. Only later did the Cameroonians discover that some of the guides had rifled through their bags. Benita's purse was missing; she didn't have any money for them to take, but she lost her rosary and passport. Pastor's small bag with his passport had also been stolen, but not his Bible, where he hid his cash in a slit sealed with super glue.

The Cameroonians and Pakistanis were now on their own. There are only a few ways for migrants to know whether they are headed in the right direction. There are trails, of course, but it's easy to end up circling back, days later, to where one started. Trails can also disappear at a river or a rock face. The best signposts are those that other migrants have deliberately left behind: torn pieces of plastic or cloth tied around a branch to indicate the correct path. More evidence would appear that they were following others — a child's knapsack, shoes, empty sardine cans. But then there were the essential items left behind: tents draped across bushes, poles jammed between rocks in the river. Had migrants discarded them because they had been lied to, as they often were, by smugglers who told them they were less than a day from finishing?

After resting, it was hard for everyone to gather the energy to keep going, and a half-hour later, the group stopped at a small opening that had been used as a campsite. It was a good location — high enough above the river so that if there was a flash flood, the site wouldn't be washed away, which was not an unusual occurrence. The smugglers had talked about how, after a rainstorm, they would find bodies of migrants, sometimes as many as a dozen, still wrapped in their tents and scattered among the rocks downstream.

The group debated whether to stay. A Cameroonian named George, who had been limping badly, was adamant they should. The Pakistanis wanted to stop as well, but they were outnumbered. As one of the Cameroonians

argued, being without food wasn't "relaxing." The group needed to keep moving while there was still light. The Pakistanis had made a deal with the Cameroonians that they would stick together. Honoring their promise, they filed out. Nihal said he hoped they'd find a suitable place to sleep before dark. "Inshallah," God willing. A couple of hours later, they stopped for the night, but George and his friend Mohammed failed to show up.

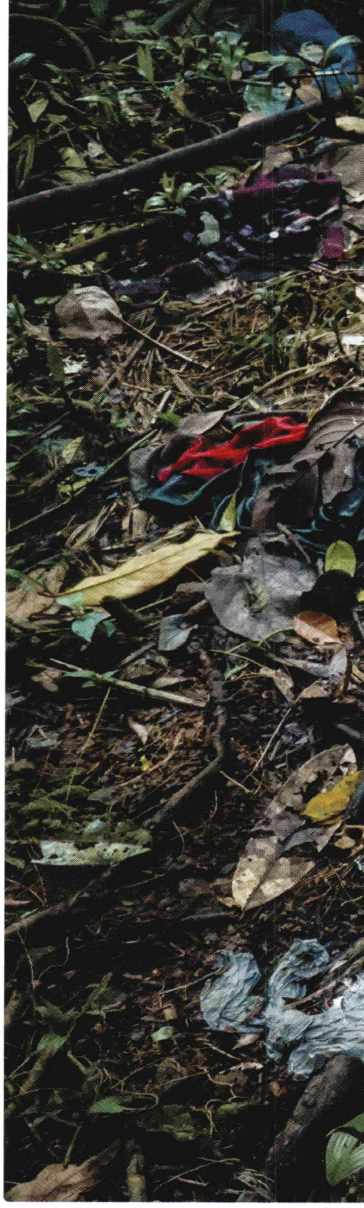
THE NEXT MORNING, another group came across George hobbling along a riverbank. Tall and muscular, he was wide-eyed with fear. He explained that his ankle injury had caused him to fall farther and farther behind. Mohammed had remained with him but in the morning had dashed off to reach the others, taking their tent with him. George had tried to follow, hopping on one leg while leaning on a walking stick but had slipped and dislocated his shoulder.

"Even his own people left him behind," the lead guide of the group said, shaking his head. George was too big to be carried, he declared. There was nothing to be done, except pop his shoulder back into place, give him provisions, and wish him luck.

The guides could surely come back for him at night, George asked, once they had dropped their packs? He would pay them well. No? Well, at least they could carry his belongings for him until he'd catch up with them at their campsite, because he was certain he would, he said. The guides agreed to carry a garbage bag of nonessentials for him, but George was so confident he'd make it that he put his food, including two cans of tuna the guides had given him, into the bag. When they insisted he keep his food, he became flustered, repacking. As he transferred documents and pills into his knapsack, he became frantic with questions. "Where do I sleep at night?" he asked over and over. "How will I do it?" No one responded.

The lead guide cut him a new walking stick with a hollow shaft, instructing George to stuff his cash inside and plug the opening with mud. Another guide slit his T-shirt with a machete and wrapped it around his shoulder as a sling. George got up and started making his way out on one foot until he had to pull himself over some large rocks. Soon, he was crawling.

There was just one more charge, Junior explained — a mandatory $20-per-person fee to ensure their safety from the "mafia."



As the trail nears the end, the number of skeletons and corpses increases.

It took hours for Mohammed to catch up to the group. The previous night, a couple of Cameroonians had gone back a half-hour on the trail to look for him and George, shouting their names into the darkness. In tears, Mohammed told them what had happened, that George could not walk, and he doubted he could make it out by himself. The group didn't even have to discuss what to do. George was a day behind, and they were low on food. They had to keep going. "There was no turning back," Vitalis said later. If they lost one of their friends to the jungle, how would they feel? Pastor wondered. He told everyone they needed to pray: They needed to ask for forgiveness for abandoning George, "because what we did was bad."

AS THEY PUSHED AHEAD, the Cameroonians rarely talked about what had happened back home. "When we are moving, we are talking about what is at hand, not your life," Vitalis said. But their minds went there. When Sandra sat down to rest for a moment, alone on the trail, she fell asleep, not sure she wanted to wake up. "I did not see any ending," she would later say. All she saw was green; it made her eyes feel weak. In her sleep, she heard a voice imploring her to keep moving: "Sandra, don't give up. Don't give up. Go," and she opened her eyes and started walking. She would never feel fear again on the walk.

Unlike the other Cameroonians, Sandra had a precise destination: a two-story apartment complex in Huntsville, Texas. That was where Ellerton, her fiancé, lived. He had left Cameroon for the United States on a student visa in 2016, when Sandra was in her second year of law school at the University of Bamenda. He had been active in organizing marches and strikes, which made him a target of the police, who had detained him several times. One night, he and Sandra heard gunshots near their home. They ran to the back of the yard and hid in the only place they could: the outdoor toilet. Within minutes, the military started shooting up the house. The next morning, they escaped the city, and a month later, Ellerton was on his way to the United States. Sandra returned to her family's village, where she thought she would be safe.

Fatigue and despair would also overwhelm Benita. She couldn't shake what she had seen in Cameroon; it gave her what she called "my problem in my mind." Images of her brother splayed out on the floor, his head in pieces, would suddenly rush in. The realization that she did not know where her family was would strike her with such force she would cry out. Running from one bush to another, she realized, had become her life. "She was moving and crying, moving and crying," Vitalis said. She told him once that she wanted to remove all her clothing — they were more than she could bear. Another time, she told Pastor, "I will go inside the river." You know why you left Cameroon, Pastor told her. "If you die here, your family will never see your body."

When the Pakistanis offered Benita nibbles of food, she would turn them down. She stopped caring, she later said, because of all the death she had known. Remembering made her breathe fast. Her words would sputter; tears would stream. "I have passed through a lot of pain that I cannot carry," she would say.

ON THEIR FIFTH DAY, Pastor woke up with a revelation. It would be their last day walking, he declared. It was true that the terrain began to change as they made their way. The river they had been following merged with two others, and it broadened, offering wide, pebbly beaches. The sky suddenly opened up and became big. When they turned their heads back, the migrants could see the mountains they had just crossed; it was as if the Darién was spitting them out into flatlands.

There was another sign that they were reaching the end: The number of corpses began to increase. There were the corpses that were visible — the ribcage splayed on a rock, the rotting body shoved off to the side of the trail,

ABOVE
The village of La Peñita, where Panamanian officials process migrants who have come through the Gap

PHOTOGRAPH BY LISETTE POOLE

the skull beside the river. Some of the Cameroonians spotted a new-looking tent off the trail, thinking they might take it for themselves. When they opened it, they discovered three bodies. "We ran," Vitalis said. The bodies kept piling up.

"We entered here," Benita said, "we meet corpse. We go this way, we meet corpse. We come back inside the water. We enter the river. We come out. We continue just like that." There was one body — half a body, without its torso and head — that struck Benita with such terror, she screamed and bolted, despite her knee. When she looked at it, she saw what she could become. Pastor yelled at her to slow down, that she would injure her leg, but Benita was off.

Then there was the death that they couldn't see but that clogged their senses. It was the fetid smell seeping through patches of brush. It was the vultures circling and squawking overhead. Seeing the bodies, Wajid said, "immediately, we got energy." When night fell, they kept on going, even though they were without a flashlight. "We walked like I have never walked before," Pastor said.

Eventually, they met a couple of men with horses, who offered, for a fee, to guide them to an indigenous village called Bajo Chiquito. One man led, while the other took the rear, lifting Benita onto his horse. The group

Somewhere near the top of the mountain, Benita had started to feel as though her leg had separated from her body.

followed a muddy path until the man in the lead said he couldn't go any farther or he risked being arrested for helping them. He assured them, though, that they were only a half-hour away from where they could cross the river and head into the village. Benita would later say she had no recollection of how she got to the river. All she knew was that she fainted along the way. "I don't know whether I come by horse," she said, "or they carry me. I just discovered myself by that water." No, Pastor said, she did not faint. She couldn't remember because she was overcome with exhaustion — "That means she wants to die because the journey is more than you."

The river was shallow. On the other side, in the distance, the Cameroonians and Pakistanis could see lights. "*Euuushh*, God!" Sandra exclaimed. She was so happy, she took off her boots and walked barefoot, crossing the river one last time. As the group approached Bajo Chiquito, the din of crickets and birds of the jungle night receded, replaced by the hum of a generator and barking dogs.

THE CAMEROONIANS and Pakistanis stayed in Bajo Chiquito for only a few days before they boarded motorized canoes for La Peñita, the village that serves as the processing center for migrants coming out of the Darién. It is a pin-drop of a place with a smattering of cinder-block and clapboard homes and barely more than 100 permanent residents. When the group arrived, the village was housing more than 400 migrants, mostly in tents and hangars. (On occasion, there have been as many as 1,200.) Authorities had also converted a large warehouse into a dormitory, but they were having difficulty keeping up with the influx. Only a dozen portable toilets served the camp, and much of the time, they were too full to use.

Migrants proceed to a trailer, where they hand over their passports and have their irises scanned and fingerprints taken with equipment provided by the United States. Officials then submit the information to the U.S.'s biometric registration system; on occasion, someone from the American Embassy comes down from Panama City to conduct an interview. Most migrants are vetted within a week or two and then wait their turn to board a bus that will take them to a camp on the border of Costa Rica. For migrants from countries the United States has deemed of "special interest" — countries thought to produce or harbor terrorists — the wait can take months, though.

This was the reality dawning on the Pakistanis. They were renting a three-room house with other Pakistanis, which they kept immaculate, leaving their flip-flops by the door. They had bought thin roll-out mattresses, a floor fan, and a couple of cooking pots. Every day, they would sit on a plastic tablecloth laid on the floor and roll small balls of dough to make chapati. They had never made the bread before — it had been the domain of their mothers and sisters — but it was one of the few activities they could undertake that connected them to their families.

Wajid wasn't angry that he had to submit his biometric information, but he was frustrated at how long the vetting would take. "We are happy, but we are very disappointed," he said. The treatment vexed Hussain. "What is the crime of the Pakistani people? Why is it happening to Muslim people? Because of my nationality or something else? I am not a Taliban." They were now thinking about going to Canada instead of the States. Waseem had an

ex-girlfriend living in Toronto. She had been blocking his phone calls, but, his friends laughed, that was no deterrent.

One day near the riverbank, Sandra, wearing ripped black jeans and an embossed sweatshirt, appeared radiant. With a borrowed phone, in one of La Peñita's patches of internet signal, she had managed to reach Ellerton. He had cried with relief to hear she made it through the Gap. He would be waiting for her in Texas, he said. In the meantime, he would send her some money for the trip. Wouldn't it be incredible, she wondered, if she, too, would be able to study in the United States? As she talked, she would sometimes shade her face with her hand to hide how giddy she was.

Escaping boredom and heat, the Cameroonians would often lie on mattresses under the rooftop that extended from the dormitory. One afternoon, Pastor was sitting with Sandra, Benita, and another member of their group, Sandrine,

Benita by the river at La Peñita

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRUNO FEDERICO

The Pakistanis couldn't perform their afternoon prayers on the trail, but at camp they used a river for ablution and airline blankets for mats.

on the mattresses. He had been ill the day before and was worried that he had contracted malaria, but the pills he'd received to fight parasites seemed to have revived him. He was going on about a video he had seen on social media of a Cameroonian boy about 4 years old, standing alone on the dirt ground looking for his parents after an attack on his village. The atrocities in his country — they were beyond understanding. That was why, he said, the Cameroonians always seemed so forlorn: They may have left their country, but they couldn't shed their lives there.

As he talked, Benita was silent, staring off into the distance. She often looked detached. "My soul is somewhere else," she said one afternoon by the river, where migrants were washing clothes and bathing. Benita felt as lost in time and place in La Peñita as she did elsewhere. When she was hiding in the bush in Cameroon, one day blended into another. She didn't know how long she had spent there: It could have been two months; it could have been six. She was certain about the day her brother was murdered — December 8, 2018 — but that was it. The Darién had plunged her into another vacuum of time. "Since I left Cameroon, I don't know. I no longer know days or months," she said. She often dreamed about her family. One night, she saw her 5-year-old son reaching out to her. Another night, she saw her mother standing across the river. "Mother, mother, I'm here!" she called, but her mother couldn't hear her. The dreams filled Benita with sadness. "What should I do now?" she asked. "I don't even know my life now."

One day, an Angolan arrived with his wife and two young children. His name was Gedeao, and he had been worried about taking his family through the Gap, but he wanted to give his children a better future. The journey had taken 14 days, and it was a nightmare, he said: "I lost my daughter." The family had been crossing a river. The current wasn't especially strong. "I don't know what happened," he said, looking down at his hands that had lost their grip on his 9-year-old girl. After scouring the river for two days, the family gave up. Bandits had

Some of the Cameroonians spotted a tent off the trail, thinking they might take it for themselves. When they opened it, they discovered three bodies.

already robbed them of everything, including their food and the $2,000 he and his wife had saved to get to the U.S. By the time they reached Bajo Chiquito, they hadn't eaten for days. We have nothing, he said, except for the blankets and diapers the border police had just given them.

An officer had spoken with him about where his daughter had been swept away — perhaps they could retrieve the body. But Gedeao didn't see the point: How would having his daughter's remains help his family? He tried to explain what might appear to some as heartless: For his family's sake, he had to find a way to outlast what had happened. Mourning had no place on this journey.

As the Cameroonians and Pakistanis shared their experience with other migrants, they came to realize how extraordinarily lucky they had been. A couple of days behind their group, ten Bangladeshi men had been robbed four times; stripped of their tents and food, they had gone three days without eating before finding another set of migrants. Bandits had robbed a Haitian woman and her boyfriend, who watched as one of them put his fingers in her vagina, searching for any dollars she may have hidden. Another Haitian had been murdered in front of his group. Sandra learned that two women a few hours ahead of her had been raped. Stories and rumors circulated continually throughout the camp; migrants assimilated them, and they became a collective memory. One of the few pieces of good news was about George. In Bajo Chiquito, the Cameroonians had pooled together money to hire a couple of horsemen to look for him. They had gotten word that the men found him, and, after two weeks in the jungle, he was recuperating in Bajo Chiquito.

A week after they arrived in La Peñita, Sandra and Benita and some of the others in the group were told they'd be on the next bus to the Costa Rican border. Pastor, though, would catch up with them later. He wanted to go to the hospital in the next town and be examined. The Pakistanis came to say

Sandra waiting to hear when she can take the bus to a camp on the Costa Rican border

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRUNO FEDERICO

goodbye. In broken English, they expressed gratitude for having gone through the Darién together. Benita thanked them for helping her. "You guys are very good," she told them, her face beaming.

Pastor said he was curious about the Pakistanis' country. Was it as beautiful as they said it was? But he worried, if he brought a black woman, how would she be treated? The conversation turned to what a Cameroonian-Pakistani baby would look like. Would it be black or white?

"Black! Black is beautiful!" Sandrine declared amid lots of giggles.

It doesn't matter, Hussain told Pastor. You will be in America. "It will be a black-and-white baby!" he exclaimed to bursts of laughter.

"Brother, see you in America!" Pastor promised. With that, Sandra and Benita, clutching $40 for the ticket, boarded the bus for Costa Rica.

NADJA DROST is a Canadian journalist and documentary filmmaker. Currently based in New York, she lived in Bogotá, Colombia, for a decade and continues to report on Latin America for the *PBS NewsHour* and other outlets.

CARLOS VILLALÓN has been photographing the Darién Gap for the past 12 years.

BRUNO FEDERICO is a documentary filmmaker based in New York.

LISETTE POOLE is a Cuban American photojournalist based in Mexico City. She recently published her first book, *La paloma y la ley*, about the journey of two Cuban women she followed to the U.S. as they migrated through 13 countries.

YOUTUBE SENSATION.
PROGRESSIVE IN A PURPLE DISTRICT.
SINGLE MOM.

What the Democratic Party could learn from first-term Congresswoman Katie Porter

By Rebecca Nelson
Photographs by Clara Mokri

Katie Porter is full of questions. There's *Would you be willing to share your Social Security number, birthdate, and address at this public hearing?* That's what she asked Equifax CEO Mark Begor when he came to testify about his company's massive data security breach at the House Financial Services Committee (he declined). There's *Are you lying to a federal judge or are you lying to me and this Congress?* She flung that one at Wells Fargo CEO Tim Sloan

after pointing out the inconsistencies in his company's legal arguments and public statements (he resigned two weeks later). And there's the instant classic *Do you know what an REO is?* That one was for Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson (she was talking about the acronym for "real estate owned," a common industry term; he thought she was talking about an Oreo cookie). These questions are the moments that, in Porter's first year in Congress, ricocheted across the internet and made her a rising star among the MSNBC class.

A first-term Democratic congresswoman from Orange County, California, Porter regularly eviscerates witnesses who testify before the House Financial Services Committee, which was not known for compelling television until she joined it. Clips of her cross-examinations now have hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube. At a recent event in her district, a woman tried to get a picture with her, concluded the photo line would be impossible, and took a star-struck selfie with Porter in the background instead. Before a town hall that evening, at the end of a long line of attendees that went out the door of the community center, I overheard a woman who looked to be in her 70s tell a friend, "Katie Porter is my spirit animal."

It's unusual for anyone other than the most devout political junkie to know the name of a freshman House member. At least that was true until the 116th Congress, which has produced "the Squad," the four first-term freshmen Democrats known for their online followings and far-left politics. Porter has gone a different route. In just over a year, the former law professor has established herself as a YouTube celebrity, a prolific fundraiser, and a progressive who also works with Republicans to pass serious legislation. In a political era defined by Donald Trump, the Democratic Party has been going through a full-blown identity crisis. What should the party look like? What should it sound like? Porter, who represents a district that, before her election, had never sent a Democrat to Congress, offers an intriguing model for how the party might move forward.

Porter, who's 46, has a warm, over-caffeinated energy, some of which is innate and some of which comes from Starbucks cold brews and a minifridge full of Diet Dr Pepper. She's unfailingly polite, even when grilling witnesses. While questioning Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg in October, she responded to one of his answers with a genuine, not at all sarcastic, "Super!" When I first met her in early November, she greeted me with a story about how *Politico* had confused her with Katie Hill, the other Southern California freshman Democrat named Katie, who had just resigned from office after allegations of sexual misconduct. Porter told me this conspiratorially, leaning in as if she were delivering gossip to an old friend. Then she shook her head and laughed. "Dips---s."

That was, I soon discovered, classic Porter, who's known among her colleagues in Washington for her dry sense of humor. In an appearance on *Real Time with Bill Maher*, she told the host, who had just revealed he was "squishy" about abortion because his mom had considered ending her pregnancy with him, "Look, your mom made her choice, and we're all here with the consequences of that choice." The audience went nuts. Maher looked aggrieved.

Porter is one of the most progressive members of the new Congress: She supports Medicare for All and was one of the first members in a swing district to announce her support for impeachment. But she doesn't make those beliefs central to her identity. Instead, she presents herself as a fierce consumer-protection advocate and a divorced mother of three who understands the struggles average Americans face. It's a canny and probably necessary

strategy. More than 35 percent of the voters in her district are registered Republicans; 27 percent have no party preference.

"She is careful about which issues she speaks out on and which issues she supports behind the scenes," said Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, the co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, of which Porter is a member. "Even if she's going to vote with progressives, she's not necessarily going to make every vote as vocal a priority."

On the progressive issues she does speak out on, Porter rarely talks like an ideologue. At a women business owners event in her district, she answered a question about health care with a story of her own. "I went to the Albertsons here to fill a prescription the other day. They said, 'Your doctor didn't fill out a pre-authorization form. You'll have to go back to your physician' — another visit — 'to get this pre-authorization form.' And I said, 'I can't do that. I have to go to D.C. tomorrow. I'll just pay out of pocket, maybe.' And they said, 'OK, that'll be $3,000 for a 30-day supply.'" Several women in the audience gasped. When she told the pharmacist she couldn't afford that, they suggested she use a prescription discount card like Rx Helper. Using the card, the prescription dropped to $70. It seemed like a godsend. But then, just before she was about to pay, the catch: "The pharmacist said, 'Just know that next month, when we get the authorization form back, and you're covered by your health insurance, it's going to be $300.'"

"So I ask you," she continued, "what is the price of that drug?" It's crucial, she told the audience, "to start from the premise that continuing the status quo is not an economically viable option." Which led to her stance on Medicare for All. "I think it is really important to say to Big Pharma and to big insurance companies and those who are gouging the American patients as well as the American businesses, 'If you don't create market forces and competition and price negotiation and a meaningful capitalist marketplace in health care, then we will go the other direction.'"

Porter supports Medicare for All and was one of the first members in a swing district to announce her support for impeachment. But she doesn't make those beliefs central to her identity.

1

Questioning Comptroller Joseph Otting at a recent House Financial Services Committee hearing

Most politicians' I'm-just-like-you anecdotes are carefully crafted narratives regurgitated at every stump speech. With Porter, you get the impression that she could have picked any snippet of her life to share, and it would have resonated. "I'm going to use that personal experience to speak up," she told me later. "Because I am a single mom, because I drive a minivan with 120,000 miles on it, because I was surprise-billed. I'm going to speak up about those issues in ways that I think are going to call out that there are some problems in Washington. That there are things that we need to be doing more aggressively to fix them."

When she talks to constituents, Porter can sound professorial, taking the time to explain the workings of Capitol Hill without talking down to them. At a town hall at a synagogue, she mentioned one of her bills, saying it had been "marked up through committee." Rather than leaving it at that, she detailed what that means. ("A bill gets entered into Congress. It goes to a committee. The committee then sometimes has a hearing. They have what's called a markup. It's a discussion, basically, between the members of the committee of the bill.")

Later, a man in the back asked why the "Democrat" Party was so against Trump's border wall. He'd been to Mexico, he said. He'd been to the border. It's a dangerous hellscape. Why don't Democrats want to protect our country from the cartels?

Porter spent six minutes answering him. The vast majority of the gangs, she said, come in through ports of entry — they drive over the border, come into the Port of Long Beach, fly into John Wayne Airport. Democrats have appropriated millions for better border security at those places. These cartels, she went on, they're sophisticated. They're building tunnels and using other tools to evade the existing border security. She'd gone to the border in August and talked to Customs

and Border Protection agents, she said, who told her that the physical barriers already at the border were plenty sufficient.

"Border security is something that every single country has to have," she said. "It's part of being a nation-state, having some system of knowing who's coming and going and having some system of admitting people. But that system has to honor our principles of who we are as a country. It has to honor our promises of international law, and it has to make smart use of taxpayer dollars to actually improve what's happening at our borders rather than achieve a political agenda for any particular person."

When she finished, the mostly liberal audience applauded loudly. I looked over at the man who had asked the question. He cocked his head, shrugged his shoulders, and joined in the clapping.

PORTER GREW UP

on a family farm outside of Lorimor, in central Iowa, in a house her great-grandfather built. Her dad and grandfather grew corn, soybeans, and hay, and she showed pigs and cows in the 4-H club. She wasn't interested in politics beyond an Iowan's first-in-the-nation civic duty to shake hands with presidential candidates. "I grew up in a poor farming community," she told me. An enormous blue-and-white quilt hung on the wall behind her that her mom, who used to host a show called *Love of Quilting* on Iowa public television, sewed for her office. "There was no PTA. There was just getting through the day." This was in the midst of the farm crisis in the early 1980s, which decimated her community. Her parents took jobs off the farm, and though her grandfather continued to work the land, he managed a much smaller tract. As a kid, she'd spend afternoons walking along the gravel roads of the countryside looking for pop cans because each one earned a rebate of 5 cents. Eventually, the family sold the farm and house.

After she attended a summer camp for gifted middle schoolers at Iowa State, the program sent her a packet of information on other academic opportunities. That's how she learned about Phillips Academy Andover, the prestigious Massachusetts boarding school where she spent her last two years of high school on scholarship. She's said that when she first got to campus and met her privileged classmates, she prayed, "Please let me pass, please let me pass." She did better than that: She went on to Yale. On campus, she was known as a big personality, a gregarious farm kid with a knack for storytelling. After college, she taught math and history in Hong Kong, then worked as a costume designer for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Eventually, she went to Harvard Law. In her third year, she took an 8 a.m. bankruptcy class with Professor Elizabeth Warren. That class has become a pillar of her self-mythology. It changed her life, she says. The questions Warren talked about that first day — What do we do in a free-market economy when people stumble? When things go wrong? When there are downturns? — have driven her ever since.

(She and Warren have remained close: Warren appeared in campaign ads for Porter during the 2018 election, and Porter was one of the national co-chairs for the senator's presidential campaign, stumping for her in Iowa ahead of the January caucuses. Porter also named her daughter, Betsy, after the senator.)

Porter went on to teach law, giving a version of Warren's bankruptcy lecture to her students at the University of Iowa; the University of Nevada, Las Vegas; and the University of California, Berkeley. She became a consumer-protection advocate, writing books about bankruptcy and consumer debt. In 2007, her paper on questionable lending practices — mortgage servicers, she found, often charged the wrong fees and lacked required documentation — was some of the first research to sound the alarm on the impending housing crisis. In 2011, the University of California, Irvine, recruited her to its

1

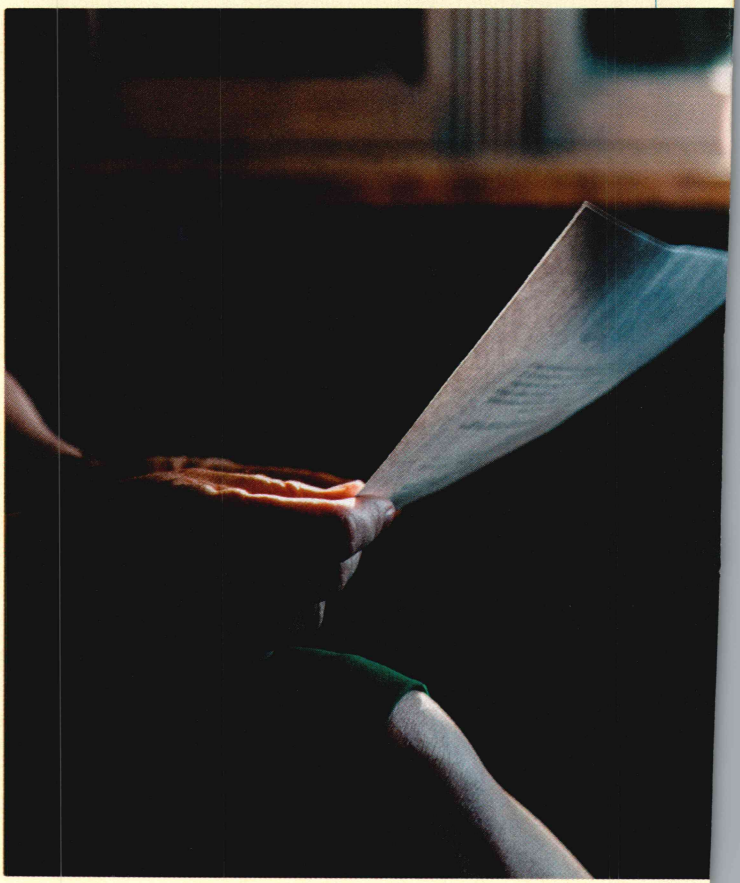
Porter has raised $3.9 million for her re-election fight, a stunning sum for a freshman House member. Much of that support has come from outside her district — a reflection of how quickly she's gained national prominence.

2

With Elizabeth Warren upon graduating from Harvard Law School; introducing her daughter to Speaker Nancy Pelosi on the first day of the 116th Congress

3

Porter is the only single mother in Congress with young children.



newly formed law school. "We had a real sense that she was a rising star," said Erwin Chemerinsky, the school's founding dean. She was driven, rigorous, and demanding of her students. ("I think I was almost always feared by them," she told me.)

The next year, state Attorney General Kamala Harris tapped Porter to monitor banks' compliance with California's portion of the national mortgage settlement, which resolved claims against financial institutions that had wrongfully foreclosed on homeowners during the 2008 disaster. Her office responded to more than 5,000 complaints. Her chief of staff during that time, Lynh Tran, told me that Porter would visit with people struggling with their mortgages and would often be moved to tears.

2

To be honest, I said, I hadn't noticed. "That's quiche," she said with a what-are-you-gonna-do? shrug.

It got her thinking, though. Maybe she shouldn't wait four years to take action. She talked to friends and mentors, including Warren, and started to think that maybe she could do it. Maybe her boyfriend was right. Maybe nobody would notice the grease stain.

Orange County had long been a conservative stronghold. The county, which Ronald Reagan once quipped was "where the good Republicans go before they die," had not voted for a Democrat for president since 1936, and the 45th District had sent only Republicans to Congress. But in recent years, the demographics have changed, as the number of Latinos and Asians has increased rapidly. When the district voted for Hillary Clinton by five points in 2016, the Democratic Party saw an opportunity to flip three other congressional districts, pouring millions into the races and moving senior staffers to a newly opened Irvine office. Porter, however, wasn't the party's choice to swing the 45th. The state party endorsed the more moderate Dave Min, another UC Irvine law professor, who also had the backing of more than a dozen members of Congress.

In the primary, Porter looked at people who had registered as Democrats or "no party" preference for the first time after the 2016 election, on the theory that they'd been galvanized by antipathy for Trump. She reached out to moderate suburban women, many of them Republicans, identifying early on a constituency who was moving away from the president. (That strategy could work only in California's top-two primary system, in which all candidates compete in a single primary and the top two advance to the general election.) Porter, the single mom who shopped at the local supermarket, resonated with them. She also identified progressive issues that would play well in the

2. COURTESY KATIE PORTER (TOP); U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (BOTTOM)

EVERY WOMAN

who ran for office during 2018's Year of the Woman has a story about what inspired her. Here is Porter's: On election night 2016, she brought her kids to her neighborhood community center. She also purchased a sheet cake with Hillary Clinton's name on it. She'd been asked to join the Clinton transition team and had bought winter clothes ("like, actual boots") for her six-week sojourn to Washington. Her luggage was packed. When she realized Clinton was going to lose, the first thing she did was go home and unpack all of her new clothes.

"It was that night that I said, 'I have to wait. I was so excited to do this. I really wanted to see these things happen in Washington and now, who knows what's going to happen?'" Her boyfriend — who often ferries her around to events in Orange County in his beat-up Toyota Camry, topped with a surfboard — suggested she run for Congress. She shrugged him off. He was just trying to make her feel better, she thought. "You know, like when your favorite blouse gets ruined."

We were at a coffee shop a few blocks from the Capitol when she told me this story. She pointed to a grease stain on her top. "If he were here, he'd be like, 'Nobody will notice that.' And I'd be like, 'Yes! Yes, they will!'"

3

district. Proposition 63, a 2016 ballot measure that instituted background checks on ammunition purchases and banned large-capacity magazines, had passed the district overwhelmingly. Meanwhile, the Republican incumbent, two-term Representative Mimi Walters, boasted an A rating from the NRA. Porter made gun control a major theme in her campaign.

Although she didn't take corporate Political Action Committee money, she had plenty of outside help from progressive groups who saw her as the liberal alternative in the race. EMILY's List, the Democratic PAC that supports pro-choice women candidates, backed her as the group's first endorsement of a House challenger in the 2018 cycle, and End Citizens United, another PAC, made her campaign the first it had ever spent on in the primary. The two groups teamed up to send out mailers and run digital ads.

In the spring of 2018, right before the June primary, the circumstances around Porter's divorce started getting more attention. When she was married, her husband had thrown things at her and, on one occasion, according to court records, pushed her into a bookcase. She filed for a protective order against him and eventually gained custody of their three children. Rumors swirled that her contentious divorce was potentially disqualifying baggage. Min, her chief opponent in the primary, ran ads claiming Porter had lied about being a consumer-protection attorney because she wasn't licensed to practice in California. The ads were misleading: She was licensed in Oregon; teaching law at Irvine did not require her to be licensed in California. Ultimately, Porter defeated Min in the primary by almost 4,000 votes.

In the general, she assailed Walters's record of voting with Trump 99 percent of the time. It took nine days after the election for the final numbers to come in. Porter won by 4 points. "There was a real Trump backlash in Orange County," said Republican pollster Adam Probolsky. Any competent Democrat, he said, could have won in 2018 running against Trump. Although it's true that Democrats swept all seven congressional districts that make up Orange County, that perspective minimizes Porter's shrewdness. One example: She took positions that didn't always square with her progressive politics but catered to the district's affluent voters. She supported repealing the cap on state and local tax deductions, a vestige of the Republicans' 2017 law that increased taxes largely on wealthy homeowners. And in her first TV ad of the general election, she called for repealing the recent increase in the California gas tax.

Although Porter was part of the so-called pink wave, which ushered in a historic 102 women to the House of Representatives, she doesn't think that number is something to celebrate, given that women still make up only 23 percent of Congress. "I don't know how that's *so* many women."

As soon as she arrived in Congress, the House Financial Services Committee was an obvious destination. Previously, members had used the committee mostly for fundraising: Newly elected members from swing districts would join to get easy access to Wall Street lobbyists and bankers. That was not Porter's aim. She figured out early on that, while there was a lot she couldn't do because she wasn't senior enough, she at least had the same amount of time to question witnesses as every other member. She decided to make the most of those five minutes. "It's never been my intention to go viral or create a TV clip," she told me. "We don't know what's going to catch the imagination or capture the interest of the American people. We're trying to ask good questions."

That's true, but those viral moments have helped Porter raise $3.9 million for her re-election fight in November, a stunning sum for a freshman House member. Much of that support has come from

outside her district, through progressive groups like Democracy Engine and the Democratic fundraising platform ActBlue. That's a reflection of how quickly she's gained national prominence. "She's making sure she's up front and in the eye of the media," said Randall Avila, the executive director of the Republican Party of Orange County.

In December, Nancy Pelosi named Porter to the House Oversight Committee, which has broad investigative authority and is one of the most powerful assignments in Congress. Financial Services is generally an exclusive committee, meaning it is the only one a member sits on. But Pelosi made an exception for Porter — a sure sign that the party considers her an up-and-coming member.

THERE ARE MANY

things about Congress that don't make sense to Porter. There's the arcane voting process, which requires members to line up on the House floor, where they eventually all cluster and crowd around the machines and cause a traffic jam. There's the baked-in partisanship, like how newly elected Democrats and Republicans rode separate buses at their orientation last January, setting the tone for how members interact across the aisle, or don't.

One of her most well-worn laugh lines is how much academia prepared her for Congress. The endless meetings! The stunning inefficiency! When there's so much she wants to get done! Overhauling the health care system. Passing gun control. Lowering prescription drug prices. Curbing climate change.

"Laundry!" chirped her 14-year-old son, Luke, who was lounging on the couch in her Capitol Hill office.

Porter nodded. "Seven loads we counted out last night. Or six loads?" Six loads, they agreed. "Two overflowing baskets." She took a bite of a Subway sub. She'd barely had time to eat all day. What she's learned over the past year is that she never has any time. To eat, to see enough of her kids, to get everything done that her constituents are counting on her to do. When she first got to Washington, a retired congresswoman warned her that she wouldn't have time to go to the grocery store. This congresswoman would buy Costco snacks in her district and fly them back with her. Porter thought this sounded ridiculous. "Not two months later, I flew back to D.C. with a four-pack of toilet paper because I didn't know where I could go on the Hill to buy it."

What she was saying is that this place wasn't built for people like her. Moms, single moms, single moms of young kids, single moms of young kids who also still lead the local Cub Scout pack because they can't bear to give it up. She's one of just a handful of single mothers in Congress and the only one with young children. Even though there are more women in the 116th Congress than any before it, the way the legislative branch operates still assumes that members have a wife who can cook for the kids while their husband is at the Capitol voting in the middle of dinnertime.

Earlier that day, when Porter arrived at a Financial Services Committee hearing, she was visibly distressed. She took her seat on the second row of the dais, and as she talked with members Cindy Axne and Rashida Tlaib, I saw her mouth, "It's OK." But it didn't look like it was OK. As they sat down, she wiped tears from her eyes. During our interview, I asked what had happened earlier.

"During the committee meeting?" she responded. "I was just talking to my friends. I mean, Rashida and Cindy are my two best friends in Congress. Where you sit really matters. You're assigned seating. And those are my two best friends. We haven't seen each other in ten days, so we're talking about our travels and our kids and our votes and our districts and our races. Those are the two people that I talk with about stuff. All the same kinds of stuff that you talk about with your best friend at work.... They're in some of the same situations I'm in. They're both raising kids."

Right, I say awkwardly. It's just, well, I could see you were crying.

"I was talking to my best friends." She paused, then said curtly, "I get to have best friends, too."

In March of last year, Porter introduced the Help America Run Act, which would allow candidates to use campaign funds for child care, elder care, dependent care, and health care premiums. She knows that there aren't more single parents in Congress because it's incredibly difficult — not to mention expensive — to run a campaign when you have kids to take care of. Congress needs to look more like America, she said. Like everyday people. The bill passed the House in October with unanimous, bipartisan support.

In her third year at Harvard Law, Porter took an 8 a.m. bankruptcy class with Elizabeth Warren. That class has become a pillar of her self-mythology. It changed her life, she says.

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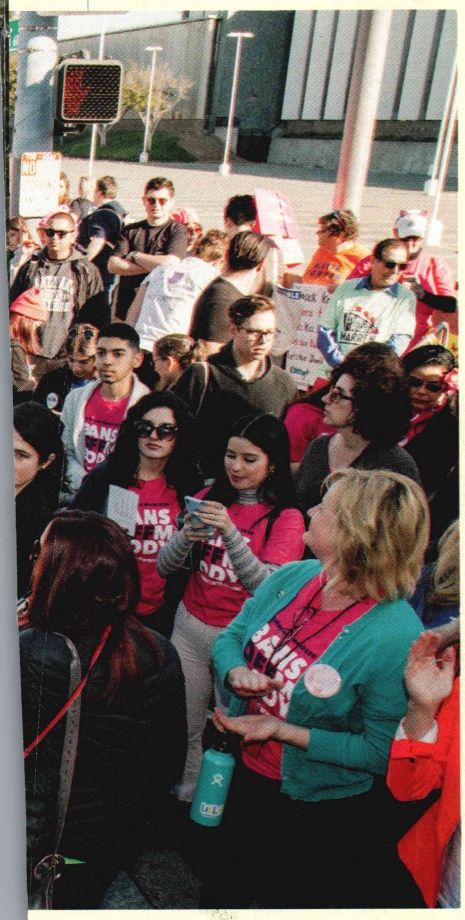
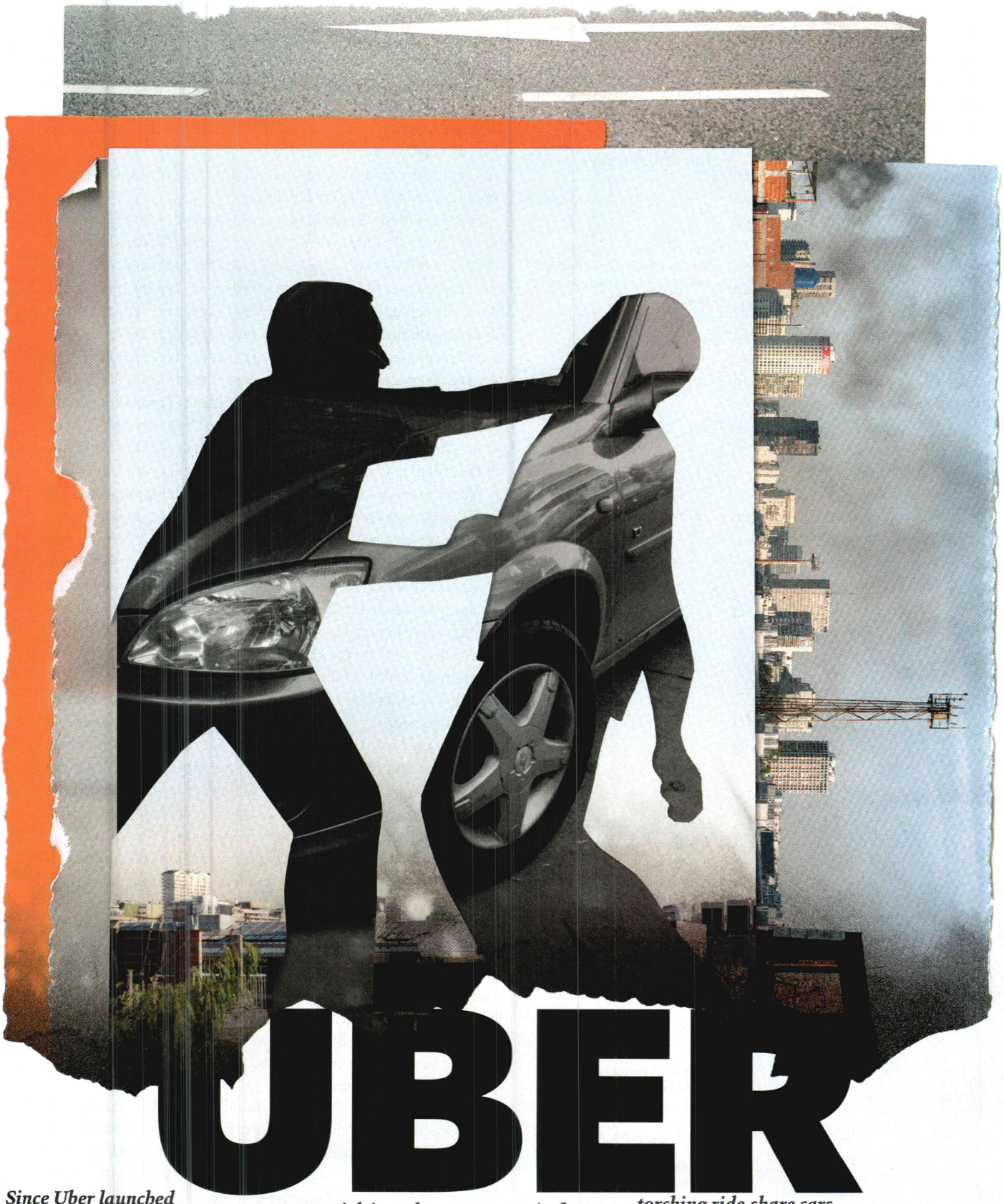


Porter at the Orange County Women's March in January, where she was the keynote speaker

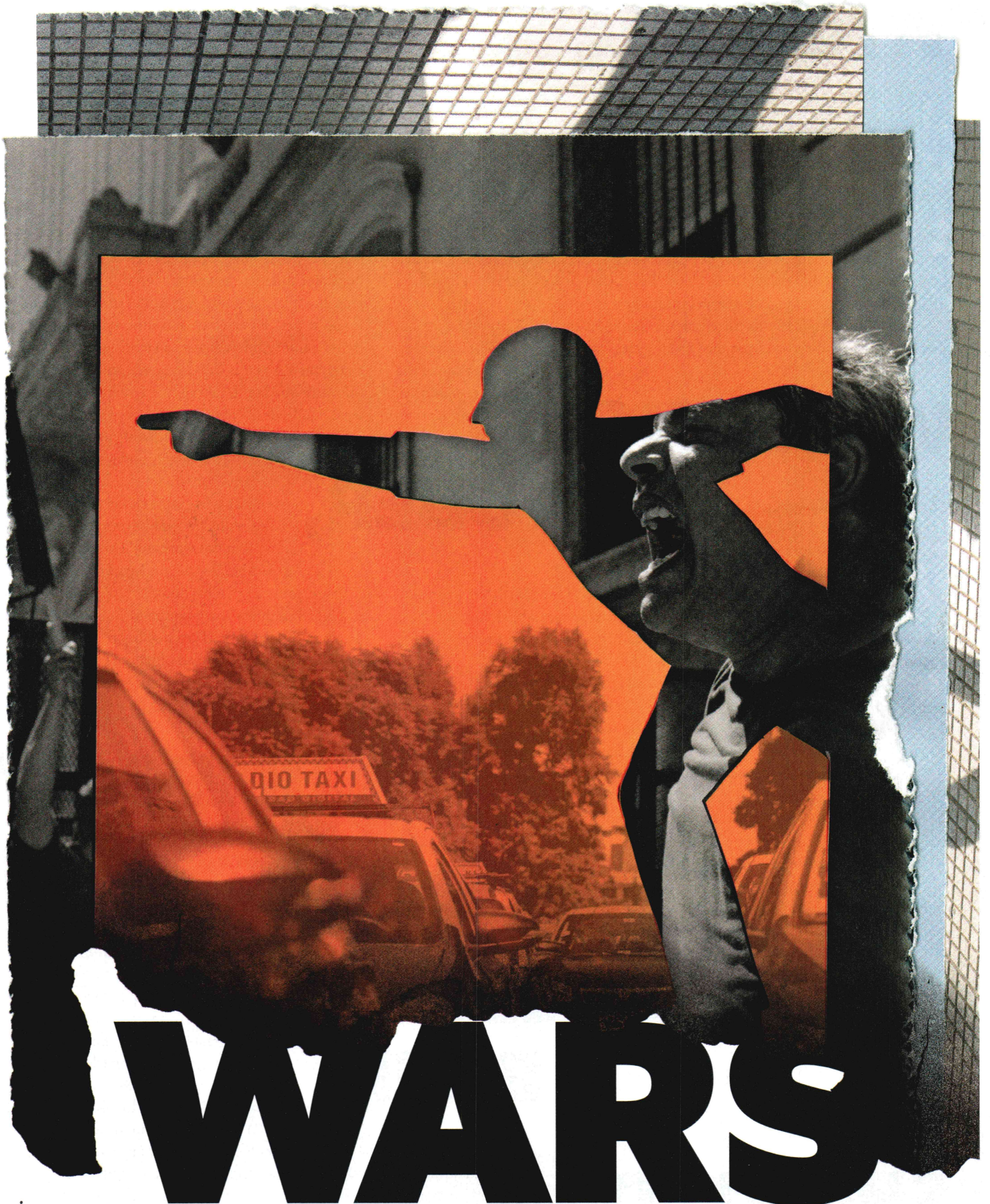
REBECCA NELSON is a magazine writer based in New York. Her work regularly appears in *The Washington Post*, *Elle*, *GQ*, and many other publications.

CLARA MOKRI is a photographer from Los Angeles. She received her bachelor's degree from Yale University in 2018 and is currently in the Master of Journalism program at UC Berkeley.



UBER

Since Uber launched in Argentina in 2016, taxi drivers have come out in force, torching ride-share cars, and beating drivers,



WARS

shaming passengers. And they're still angry.

BY WES ENZINNA

ARTWORK BY JOAN WONG
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOYA SARNO JORDAN

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING WORKING FOR UBER, SCUMBAG?"

It was April 2019, and Boeri had been driving his taxi down a tree-lined street in the Constitución neighborhood of Buenos Aires when he spotted the white Chevy Aveo. Even though the government had passed laws prohibiting Uber from operating in the city, cars had popped up everywhere, thousands and thousands of them, like *un chorro*, or diarrhea, he thought, making a mess of everything. He had paid $1,300 for his taxi driver's license and hundreds of dollars in annual fees — costs that Uber drivers didn't have. Every time he saw one of their cars, he imagined someone taking food from his family.

He'd been through all this once before. Unlike many of the city's 38,000 taxi drivers, who usually come from the working class and the poor *villas de emergencia* on the edge of the city, Boeri was once upper-middle class — a banker at Banco Roberts, which later became HSBC. But then the country's 2001 economic crash ruined him, like so many other members of the middle class. After he was fired, he became a taxi driver to prevent defaulting on his mortgage, and it took him 15 years to reestablish himself. Now, these Ubers were trying to ruin him all over again. Boeri, in response, helped form Taxistas Unidos, a group of about 1,500 drivers who use a variety of aggressive tactics to prevent Uber from operating. Argentine journalists dubbed them "*caza* Ubers" — Uber hunters.

Boeri parked his taxi in front of the Chevy, blocking it from moving, a tactic drivers call a "*choque*," similar to the maneuver used by police to stop a motorist from fleeing. Capturing the scene on his phone, Boeri approached the car on foot alongside several other taxi drivers.

Jorge Ledesma was taking a break from shuttling Uber passengers around. He had just stirred hot water and maté leaves into his little brown *guampa*, the calabash gourd Argentines use to mix tea. It was a gray, dreary day, and now, framed in his driver's side window, like a cop writing a speeding ticket, there was this cab driver in a polo shirt, cellphone in one hand, calling him a scumbag. There were hundreds of videos of fights between taxi and Uber drivers circulating in WhatsApp groups, on Twitter, and sometimes in the news when someone leaked a clip. Ledesma knew that if the camera was out, nothing good was going to happen.

"I'm not working," Ledesma said, still holding his guampa. He shrugged.

Boeri yanked open his door.

Ledesma threw the guampa at Boeri, pushed him out of the way, and jumped out of the car. He ran to his trunk and pulled out a pipe and a large knife. Ledesma watched as Boeri ran back to his own trunk, where he took out a weapon.

"What are you gonna do with that knife, b----?" Boeri taunted, coming back toward him. "You want to see who the real man is? Let's find out!"

That's where the video goes shaky. There's blurry asphalt, then sky, then asphalt again, and the sound of groaning and shouting. Off camera, Ledesma allegedly stabbed one of the drivers.

Since Uber arrived in Argentina in 2016, there have been more than 1,041 such fights — that have been reported to police, anyway. While the level of violence is extraordinary, the tensions are familiar. When Uber was created in 2009, the company's leaders earned a reputation for entering markets chaotically, fighting against transportation authorities and taxi drivers unions, and ignoring laws. The messiness of Uber's playbook, in turn, has given Uber hunters their greatest weapon: the argument that, by attempting to stop Uber drivers from operating, they are simply trying to *enforce* the law, not break it.

"We don't condone or justify violence," Boeri told me. "But when you're powerless, and Uber keeps ignoring the law, and no one does anything, and you can't feed your family, they push you into a corner where violence is one of the only responses you have available."

MARCELO BOERI SHOUTED.

IN BUENOS AIRES, politics often play out in the streets. In 1946, Eva Perón created the country's first national taxi drivers union, a force of thousands of drivers who would flank the city's streets during her speeches. It was her allies in the municipal government who, for the first time, color coordinated all the city's cabs to be yellow and black, like industrious bumble bees. So intertwined is the legacy that Evita's grave in the Recoleta Cemetery bears only two plaques, one donated in her honor by workers from the General Confederation of Labor, the other given by the Taxi Drivers Union, with the now-famous phrase, "Don't cry for me, Argentina."

When a dictatorship toppled the country's civilian government in 1976, secret agents kidnapped dissidents off the streets so frequently that the green Ford Falcon, the car used to disappear the government's enemies, came to represent terror. When Boeri was 3 years old, his father was taken by the junta, tortured, and executed. Boeri's first memory is attending a protest with his mother a year later, in the Plaza de Mayo, where families of victims still hold vigils and demand information about their vanished loved ones. "I've never lost my rage over my father's murder," Boeri said.

The years since have heralded disaster for the Argentine economy. A decade of inflation in the 1990s culminated in the 2001 crash in which the peso was so devalued that life savings became worthless overnight. Some citizens wallpapered their homes with the currency. A series of inflation crises continued to hit throughout the 2000s, and today, many can't afford basic staples. Given their history as the favorite sons of Evita, taxi drivers play an outsize symbolic role in the city's politics — zipping around in their black-and-yellow cars, ever-present ambassadors of the working class's long-dead golden years.

The first time many Argentine taxi drivers ever heard of Uber was on March 28, 2016, when the company held a driver sign-up event at the four-star Hotel Castelar, near the Plaza de Mayo. The company wasn't yet legal or operational in Argentina — it hadn't registered as a business in the country, which, according to University of Buenos Aires sociologist Maxo Velázquez, is the way Uber typically enters markets in developing countries, where governments are less equipped to stop it. This had been the company's strategy for years elsewhere: Spend insane amounts of cash, create consumer demand, and then use that demand to pressure regulators to legalize the company. "Uber's genius is to exploit any ambiguities in the law, either as it's written or as it's enforced, and to use that to gain competitive advantage," said Brad Stone, author of *The Upstarts*, a history of how Uber and other Silicon Valley companies are changing the world.

After attempts to expand into China had failed because it was unable to outmaneuver the country's strict regulators, Uber identified Latin America as its next big market. The company knew that an economic crisis could create a huge labor pool, causing wages to go down as workers fought for jobs. "It's not that they targeted these weak economies because they're weak," said Velázquez. "It's that they quickly learned how best to take full advantage of them."

Crowds of mostly middle-aged men, many of them former cab or bus drivers, showed up at Hotel Castelar that March, enticed by the possibility of finding work. Earning a living as a cab driver had become harder — unemployment had reached 9.3 percent, and many could no longer afford taxi rides. Uber tended to be cheaper, its prices the result of lower overhead costs and subsidies from venture-capital backers.

"I signed up because I am looking for an activity that allows me to have an income," 60-year-old Osvaldo Pisano told a reporter before security guards ushered him inside to avoid stone-throwing cabbies. Inside the hotel, prospective Uber drivers got a crash course in the sharing economy. Seated in a conference room closed to cameras, the men watched a PowerPoint presentation on the company. To become a driver, they were told, all they had to do was register on Uber's website and upload a license and a waiver of insurance. At that point, the ride-sharing giant would not provide any insurance to passengers or riders in Argentina, though it had offered this protection in some developed countries. "The experience is similar to a friend taking you in his car," a presenter said. By the end of the day, 7,000 drivers had signed up.

IN A CITYWIDE EMAIL sent out on April 22, 2016, Uber announced that the service was open for business, and the 7,000 drivers' apps were activated. Twelve hours later, a Buenos Aires judge ruled the company was in violation of local laws and ordered the app to be blocked immediately. Uber ignored the ruling and continued its operations. Three days later, city inspectors and police raided the office of Uber's attorney, Michael Rattagan, armed with search warrants and an order to shut down the company. Rattagan was baffled. He claimed he hadn't heard from or worked with Uber in three years, since the company signed him on retainer. The then head of Latin American operations, David González, had hired two other lawyers in Argentina who had been secretly planning Uber's entrance into the market — training managers and tech support, preparing to battle with transportation authorities — and Rattagan had been kept in the dark.

UBER KNEW *that an economic crisis could create a huge labor pool, causing wages to go* **DOWN** *as workers fought for jobs.*

But Rattagan's name was still on all the company's legal documents in Argentina; his address was listed as the only public address for Uber. That's how taxi drivers found his office and blockaded it the day Uber launched, and how police found him three days later. Rattagan would soon

be charged with multiple crimes, including aggravated tax evasion, which included a prison sentence of up to nine years. Uber "knowingly left Mr. Rattagan ... as the sacrificial lamb," his lawyers argued, "for the scorn of the public and the criminal investigations of the Argentina authorities."

Uber's spokesperson in Buenos Aires, Juan Labaqui, attributes much of the chaos of Uber's launch to the company's early culture. "Was the entrance [into the Buenos Aires market] easy?" said Labaqui. "No. It was representative of Uber 1.0."

Mayor Rodríguez Larreta signed a law in May of that year that said any Uber driver found working for the company could be fined $130 and his car impounded for as many as five days. "As long as they do not fall in line with the law, we see the obligation to increase sanctions," vice president of the legislature, Francisco Quintana, told a reporter. "We are open to talks as long as there is will to operate within the law. Other companies have already understood that this is the way." Quintana was referring to ride-share companies in Argentina like Cabify, which had been willing to comply and was in turn eventually legalized.

But Uber had pioneered a host of methods to dodge regulations. One of the most notorious, according to Mike Isaac, author of *Super Pumped: The Battle for Uber*, was a program that Uber engineers introduced in the Portland, Oregon, market called "Greyball" — a piece of code they secretly inserted into drivers' apps that tracked and identified police and hid Uber drivers from them. If a cop tried to hail a ride, nobody would show up. In Indonesia and other countries, they used more old-fashioned methods: bribing police. In San Francisco, the company's managers coached drivers on how to avoid detection, including removing phones from dashboards and having passengers sit up front. A manager in Florida wrote to drivers: "Remember, if you receive a ticket while picking up or dropping off Uber riders at the airport, Uber will reimburse your costs for the ticket and provide any necessary legal support.... Thank you and have a wonderful day!"

In Buenos Aires, several Uber drivers told me that the company's lawyers have provided legal counsel to any drivers who were fined or had their car impounded, showing up in court on their behalf. It was cheaper to pay drivers' fees than to enter a market legally. "We're in a political campaign," former Uber CEO Travis Kalanick boasted at a 2014 tech conference, "and the candidate is Uber, and the opponent is an a--hole named Taxi."

"When you're
POWERLESS,
and Uber keeps ignoring the law,
and no one does anything,
and you can't feed your family,
THEY PUSH YOU
into a corner
where violence is
one of the only
responses you have
available."

WHEN BOERI FIRST HEARD the rumors that Uber was coming to town, he and other drivers formed a WhatsApp group to vent and coordinate protests. The day of Uber's launch, the men gathered at the city's famed Obelisk, a 221-foot-tall statue at the center of the world's widest street, the 16-lane July 9 Avenue. Hundreds of taxi drivers had shown up at the Obelisk, and Taxistas Unidos was born.

Boeri was joined by another driver and friend, Marcelo Marchi, who would emerge as a sort of second in command. He'd come from a working-class family and had driven cabs since he was 23, building a life for his wife and children, even managing to send his daughter to private school. The two men are an odd couple — Boeri, with graying hair and beard, looks like the ex-banker that he is, while Marchi has a shaved head and taut muscles. Marchi's father had also been kidnapped by the dictatorship, though he was eventually released. "I'm a pretty cool-headed person in a crisis," said Marchi. "But when I do lose my temper, I'm inconsolable."

At the root of their anger was that Uber seemed to be skirting the rules that cab drivers had been forced to play by for years. Taxi drivers paid for commercial driver's licenses and yearly training and were required to follow guidelines about the upkeep of their cars, totaling hundreds of dollars per month, which sometimes ate up as much as a quarter of their earnings. "How could you compete with drivers who didn't have these costs?" Marchi wondered. There's no medallion system in Argentina, like in New York, but when Marchi heard of a deeply indebted cab driver in Manhattan committing suicide, it resonated. "It's a David versus Goliath story, except Goliath is bigger, and we're much smaller than David.... We had no idea how to go about trying to stop them — we were trying to figure it out."

Taxistas Unidos wasn't a union, and there were no dues. There were five leaders, including Boeri and Marchi, but there were no designated roles or titles except for Boeri, who was the official spokesperson. Taxistas Unidos would meet about once a month but mostly communicated via a host of WhatsApp groups or at service stations where they hung out between shifts.

Their goal was to help — or pressure, if need be — authorities to enforce the law, and to do this, they needed to be able to identify Uber drivers. In their various WhatsApp groups, the taxi drivers began tracking every Uber license plate they saw, spotting the app open in a cup holder or a customer waiting on a sidewalk, looking back and forth between his

phone and a car before getting in. The taxi drivers compiled all of these plate numbers in one spreadsheet. Soon, they'd recorded 5,000 numbers, then 7,000, 10,000, 15,000... When the spreadsheet became inefficient, Marchi transferred the numbers to the app Telegram; it took him and two other drivers three days and nights. Now, Taxistas Unidos had an open database of all suspected or confirmed Uber license plates to which any app user could contribute.

Sometimes a Taxistas Unidos member would call an Uber and take it directly to the police station. Or they'd form a posse and trap a car in a choque and then call the police. Marchi recalled car chases involving 15 taxis and one Uber. "It was exciting," he said.

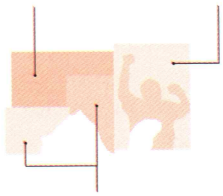
When another inflation crisis hit the country in 2018, the worst since 2001, tensions between Uber and taxi drivers exploded. "My wages were cut in half," said Claudia Tripi, a taxi driver. Suddenly, Argentina became Uber's fastest growth market in the world. Twenty percent of its drivers in Buenos Aires were jobless before joining. The economic downturn "has certainly helped many people find us as an alternative source of income," Felipe Fernandez Aramburu, who runs Uber business development in Argentina, told Reuters. At the same time, Uber's growth resulted in a 40 percent decrease in rides for taxi drivers, claimed Omar Viviani, secretary general of the Union of Taxi Renters. It made Uber drivers the perfect scapegoats for the larger crisis. "What do you do to a rat that steals your bread?" one Taxistas Unidos member asked me. "You squash it."

Martin Senson, also a Taxistas Unidos member, used Telegram to identify a ride-share driver, cut him off, get out of the car, and then pummel the man in the face with brass knuckles after yelling, "We already know who you are, and we know your car.... We are going to kill you." At least eight Uber cars were set on fire that year, and dozens more were vandalized. Between January and September 2018, Uber drivers filed 250 complaints against taxi drivers. Uber representatives claim that number is closer to 750. One taxi driver reportedly accosted a woman who he mistakenly thought was waiting for an Uber. She filmed the incident, and the man lost his license. Another ride-share driver had his windshield shot out with an air rifle.

While Boeri condemned the violence publicly ("We don't hunt Ubers," Boeri said. "We do interventions. We don't break

Marcelo Boeri helped form Taxistas Unidos, a group of about 1,500 drivers who oppose Uber.

Marcelo Marchi is a prominent member.



In March, taxi drivers in Buenos Aires participated in a protest of the ride-share company.

the laws"), he seemed to tolerate, even encourage, it privately. In a voice message sent out to other Taxistas Unidos members after Senson lost his license, he said, "If they mess with a driver, they mess with all of us. These sons of b----es are going to force us to do whatever is necessary to make trouble."

It was during this surge in violence that the laws were beginning to shift in Uber's favor. The federal courts had essentially cleared Uber of any criminal wrongdoing and said that disputes had to be decided by each city. In August 2018, the city of Mendoza passed a law making the ride-sharing service legal, and in September, the province of Jujuy did the same — huge victories for the company. But two months later, the Buenos Aires City Council increased fines for Uber drivers to $5,000 and said a car could be impounded for up to 30 days, rather than five. The city also banned the use of local credit cards in Ubers, forcing passengers to use international cards or pay in cash. Politicians were divided over the issue, the company kept growing, and according to Velázquez, the sociologist, only a few Ubers were punished. The result was a constantly shifting understanding of both the law and the status of the company. "The situation today is such that Uber is a little legal and a little illegal," said Velázquez.

Taxi drivers began **TRACKING EVERY UBER LICENSE PLATE** *they saw, spotting the app open in a cup holder or a customer waiting on a sidewalk, looking back and forth between his phone and a car.*

One night in December, I rode around the neighborhood of Palermo with Marchi, who scanned the streets for Ubers, white earbuds dangling from his ears. The interior of his taxi was immaculate, with a "NO SMOKING" sign laminated on the back seat and a green hand towel on the dashboard to wipe sweat off his head.

In front of the Polo Club — a palatial garden surrounded by whitewashed adobe walls that hosts concerts as well as equestrian sporting events — five or six taxi drivers had gathered around an Uber. Two transit police cars had pulled up alongside them, their lights throwing neon-blue across the club, where a crowd was filtering out of the front gate. The Uber driver leaned against his black Chevy Prisma and sucked nervously on a cigarette.

Marchi and the other drivers, including an internet-famous Uber hunter known as "Taximan," swarmed around the police car, making sure the cops did their jobs. The policeman inspected the Uber driver's papers and then called the office of the district attorney. Afterward, the cop faced the crowd of cabbies. He said the DA didn't want to prosecute the case and didn't explain why. The policeman walked over to the Chevy and handed the Uber driver his registration papers back, with no fine. The driver stomped out his cigarette, got back into his car, and sped off.

Marchi recalls months when the transit police would impound an Uber three or four times — but then the car would pop right back up on Telegram, still in operation. "It's like putting a fire out with a bottle of water," Marchi said. Meanwhile, transit police would be seen openly hailing Ubers in uniform. As one Uber driver told me, he once received a ride request, showed up at the corner, and saw transit police. He called the customer and said, "Hey, meet me somewhere else. There's a transit cop on your corner."

"That's me!" the passenger said. "I'm a transit cop."

"I don't believe you," the driver said.

"Seriously, it's me. Come here."

FIVE UBER HUNTERS gathered in a brothel in January 2018 to form a plan to set Edilweis Chávez's* white Chevy Classic on fire. Other cabbies had gotten into a fight with Chávez a few weeks earlier, and in retaliation, the taxi drivers' friends tracked down his car. The small gang had burned two Ubers before, and their favorite targets were Venezuelan drivers, who've flocked to Argentina fleeing their own country's economic crisis.

The men left the brothel around 3 a.m., walked a few blocks with a jerrycan of petrol, doused the Chevy, and then lit a match. "You can't let an invasion of foreigners like Uber just do whatever they want," one of the arsonists told journalist Lula González at the time. "They mess with us, and you can't mess with someone who is willing to die in this fight." They weren't Taxistas Unidos members, but they proudly called themselves Uber hunters.

When Chávez discovered the charred remains of his car the next morning, he was horrified. He had bought the car with a loan, and he didn't even know if he had insurance. He'd come from a city near Caracas just a few months earlier. *What would he do?* Neither insurance nor Uber covers the cost of vandalism.

A large part of Uber's workforce in Argentina is comprised of Venezuelan immigrants. As many as 600 Venezuelans began arriving in Argentina weekly between 2014 and 2016. Thousands of them stayed in the country and found jobs, many as Uber drivers. At times, battles between taxi drivers and Venezuelan Uber drivers have taken on xenophobic overtones — like when, in May 2019, a brawl between nearly 40 cab drivers and Venezuelan ride-share drivers erupted in the middle of downtown, near the Obelisk. To the hundreds of pedestrians who witnessed it, the fight looked like ethnic gangland warfare as the two groups beat each other with clubs and motorcycle helmets. "I experience a lot of racism from taxi drivers," one Uber driver told González. When I met him, Marchi referred to Venezuelan "monkey eaters" before taking it back, saying

** Not his real name.*

forth

The fight looked like

ETHNIC GANGLAND

the conflict didn't target people because of their nationality, adding, "I'm a socialist, and I don't believe in borders."

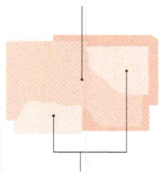
One Venezuelan Uber driver named Eiver came to Buenos Aires from Maracay, outside Caracas, and had been driving for Uber for less than a year. He'd been working in a factory as a machinist, but when his boss refused to pay him overtime, he started looking for another job. He lined up interviews at two other factories, but they were scheduled back to back, on opposite sides of town. He took a taxi, which cost close to 600 pesos, or around $20. While complaining to friends later about the high fare, he learned about Uber and how much money it could've saved him. Impressed, he ended up getting a loan on a cheap car and signing up to drive.

When Eiver started in March 2019, Uber didn't charge him commission because it was trying to attract new drivers, but a few months later, it started charging about 40 percent. Because local credit cards are prohibited on the app, he says 80 to 90 percent of his transactions were in cash, so there was no direct way to pay the company. After eight months of driving, Eiver owed Uber almost 50,000 pesos, about $830, almost two months of the average worker's salary.

Taxi drivers would scream at Eiver, taking photos of his license plate, and it spooked him. Colleagues began to carry guns and other weapons, and they sometimes fought back. Some had even posted photos of Marchi's 12-year-old daughter online.

Another Uber driver named Marcos Carlavera, who was from a small town near Buenos Aires, had worked in a metallurgical factory for 14 years, but when the 2018 crisis struck, his salary was no longer enough. He and his wife, who had been a stay-at-home mother, both needed to work, and Uber's flexibility and higher pay appealed to them.

Many taxi drivers come from poor villas de emergencia.



Marcos Carlavera started working for Uber during the 2018 inflation crisis.

Almost immediately, taxi drivers started harassing Carlavera. One day, four women from the provincial city of Rosario got off the bus and called an Uber. Carlavera picked them up. A taxi pulled up in front of him and one behind him. They threatened to call transit police. "Call them!" he said. "You're kidnapping me! You're not letting me leave!" He'd rather deal with the police than angry taxi drivers. Then four other taxi drivers arrived. The women from Rosario became frightened, canceled the ride, and left. "To arrive in Buenos Aires and begin a vacation like that? Not a pretty sight," Carlavera said.

WARFARE *as the two groups* **BEAT** *each other with clubs and motorcycle helmets.*

In the end, the police came and no charges were pressed, but Carlavera was shaken and annoyed, and he lost a half-day of work. "I'm not begging in the street. I'm not robbing anybody. I'm not taking advantage of anybody," he said. "I'm a worker."

DURING ONE OF MY LAST NIGHTS in Argentina, I got a WhatsApp message from a taxi driver I'd never met. It read: "Want to go Uber hunting?"

A black-and-yellow car pulled up at quarter past midnight. All the official taxis in Buenos Aires list the driver's name and license number; this one read "Marianna Elizabeth Ramos." But the driver wasn't a woman — he had thick arms and a baby face, with a straight Roman nose and jet-black hair. He introduced himself as Lucas.

"What are we going to do tonight?" I asked.

"We're not going dancing," he said.

We passed the Obelisk and Humberto Primo Street, sites of previous brawls. He'd been in two fights himself, though he didn't elaborate. He didn't condone violence, he said, but he would later offer to sell me videos he and others share on WhatsApp, like trophies, of fights they'd been in.

As we drove through Buenos Aires, the effects of recession were visible everywhere — scavengers hauling shopping carts full of cardboard, entire families sprawled on filthy mattresses on sidewalks, corrugated-metal shantytowns beneath bridges. There were also the occasional mansions, dance clubs, and cafés, where well-dressed couples drank Fernet at sidewalk tables.

Lucas, whose full name is Luciano Méndez, had worked two jobs but lost one, as a driver for a bus company, when the economic crisis hit. I asked if he thought he was unfairly blaming Uber drivers, who were struggling workers just like him, but he swatted away the question. "They are working super illegally," he said. "They are my enemies."

After paying for gas and car maintenance and his taxes and fees, he was left with roughly 2,500 pesos a week, about $41, to feed his wife, himself, and three children. "There are days I work 18, 19 hours per day.... I can't even pay the electricity bill, you understand me?"

As we drove through Palermo, along Paseo de la Infanta, he pointed out scores of Ubers, apps on the dashboard, passengers in the back. By 1:15 a.m., we had seen six confirmed Ubers. At one point, he radioed a friend for backup, but before he arrived, the Uber got away.

At Cross Bar, a dance club, there was a taxi lane along the sidewalk with an Uber idling in it. Lucas parked beside the car and stepped out. It was the first time I'd seen him standing, and he was big — 6 feet or so. He walked up to the Uber driver's window. "Get the f--- out of here!" he hissed, sweeping his hand under his chin — the gesture for "f--- you."

The Uber raced off, leaving behind the two men who'd requested it standing on the sidewalk, their dumbstruck faces lit up by their iPhones.

"Get in," he said, gesturing to his taxi.

"Is this gonna end badly?" one of the young men said, putting his phone in his pocket. A kidnapping was off-script even for an Uber hunter.

"Just get in," Lucas said.

What followed was a 30-minute ride in which Lucas took the two men home for free in exchange for interrogating them about why they used Uber. "In reality, I never use Uber," said one of the passengers, Marcos. Everyone laughed at the obvious lie. The conversation quickly transformed, perhaps because the passengers were a little drunk, into one about Argentina's past and future and its victimhood by Yankee imperialists. The young men were rich — Juan worked in tech and had become accustomed to using Uber while in Europe, and Marcos had more or less the same story. Belgrano, where Lucas was taking them, was one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city.

Surprisingly, all three agreed on the Uber question — they thought a law should be passed to treat rideshare drivers the same as taxi drivers, and the state should punish the company if it didn't comply. They also agreed that when Uber offered a comparatively cheap and reliable service, it was hard, as consumers in a country with such economic problems, to refuse a good deal. "I feel half-guilty exploiting workers," Juan said.

No one ventured any solutions to the macro problem underlying it all — that years of inflation and debt had ravaged the economy, and when purchasing power and wealth were diminishing, there were only so many scraps to go around. Maybe there weren't solutions, not ones anyone in the car believed in.

Yet, even while they agreed on the big picture, Juan, the drunker and bolder of the passengers, insisted violence between workers was wrong, tantamount to fratricide.

"We cannot kill each other!" he shouted, as we pulled up to his mansion-lined street, ivy veined across the buildings' facades. "The problem is the state, the problem is Uber, and not the Uber driver who is exploited, too!"

Lucas left the men with a heartfelt goodbye and started back toward downtown. It was 4 a.m. He had eight more hours to work. He drove me silently to my apartment on the other side of the city, past the cafés, past the cardboard collectors, past the street kids scrambling through dumpsters. When, near the Obelisk, we pulled up alongside what was obviously an Uber, Lucas kept driving. ✆

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TOYA SARNO JORDAN is an Argentine photojournalist covering migration, politics, and humanitarian issues.

THE HOUSE ON MAGNOLIA STREET

HOW A GROUP OF HOMELESS MOTHERS TOOK ON A HOUSING CRISIS

BY

Julian Brave NoiseCat

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

Erica Deeman

"MOMMY, you don't need to push me. I know how to swing now!" Aja hollered across the Eastshore Park playground as she kicked her legs back and forth, carrying her 5-year-old body higher. One-year-old Amir, beanie pulled down over his ears, sat up in his stroller and watched his big sister. "You're doing good!" their mother, Dominique Walker, called back from a park bench. Big silver hoops hung almost to her shoulders, and wide stunner shades covered her eyes.

Eleven days earlier, about 30 Alameda County sheriff's deputies, including a half-dozen from a tactical team wielding AR-15 rifles, arrived in an armored vehicle to evict the 34-year-old Walker and her children from a property on Magnolia Street in West Oakland. The house had been foreclosed and sat vacant for two years before Walker and a group of homeless and housing-insecure single black mothers took up residence in November.

Two blocks away from the playground, down Grand Avenue, 20- and 30-somethings browsed a farmers market, where you can buy kombucha on tap, organic root vegetables, and dim sum. A few blocks in the other direction, black Oakland natives often host cookouts on weekend afternoons like this one. Two years ago, a white Stanford-educated environmental scientist called the cops on one of these black family barbecues. An image of the caller — a woman, shades on, cellphone pressed to her ear, 911 operator on the line — became a meme.

Across MacArthur Boulevard, under the Interstate 580 overpass, a group of homeless men had set up a short line of tents beside a bus stop, using the freeway for shelter as they panhandled. Encampments like this have become a regular sight in parks and parking lots. The city's homeless numbered 4,071 at last official count in January 2019 — up 47 percent from just two years prior. The median price of a home in Oakland has surged to over $700,000. The median renter now pays about $3,000 a month. Families who can't afford these

NO
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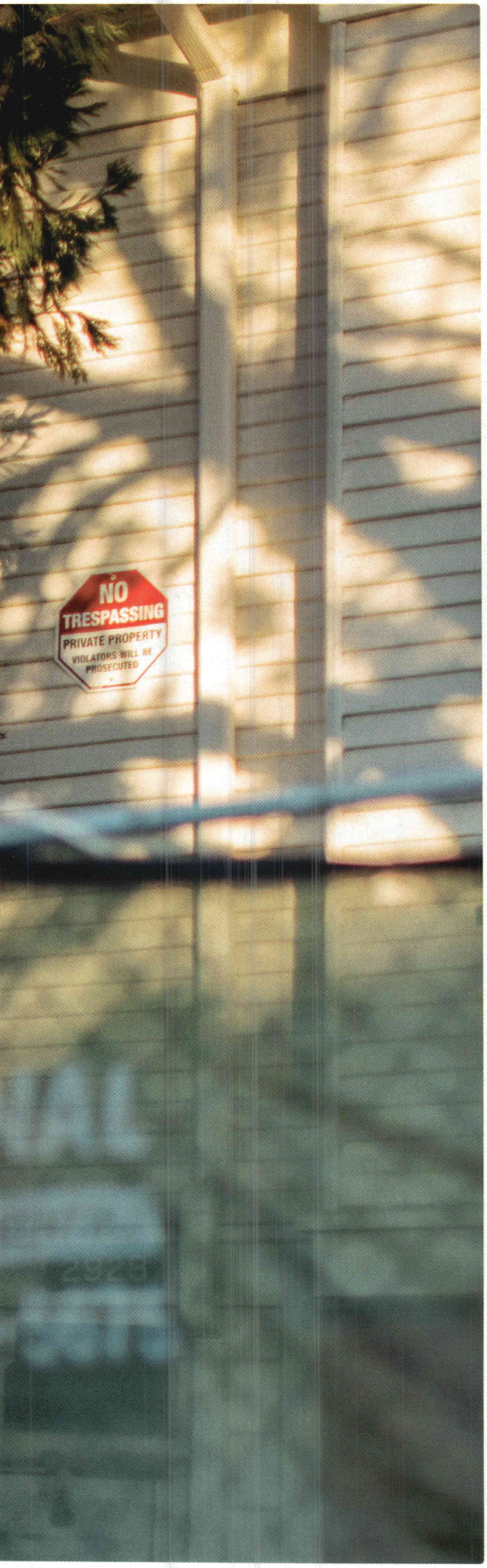

prices have no choice but to leave.

In April 2019, Walker fled domestic violence in Jackson, Mississippi, and returned home to Oakland. Her family, like many others, migrated to Oakland from the Jim Crow South. Black residents made up a plurality of the city's population from the 1980s to the 2000s, but back on the 700 block of East Oakland, her old neighborhood, Walker saw a real estate market where predominantly white households and investors were effectively pushing out black families who had been there for generations. "This is where my family found refuge from sharecropping and the KKK," said Walker. "We've been here ever since."

On streets where Black Panthers in leather jackets and berets once clashed with Oakland police, the potential for racialized class war lingers. In recent years, a number of condominium construction sites burned down under suspicious circumstances. Reports of anti-gentrification arsons swirl. A 45-year-old Oakland man was convicted for setting at least one of these blazes, though they've continued while he's been incarcerated. In July, a real estate developer dressed up as an elf and wearing a "Make Oakland Great Again" hat attempted to shoot $1,000 out of a leaf blower into a homeless camp to coax the residents to relocate. Lawmakers have struggled to find effective solutions. In December, Oakland City Council President Rebecca Kaplan proposed docking a cruise ship in the city's port to serve as emergency housing.

Walker had originally planned to move back in with family and enroll at the University of San Francisco to become a health practitioner. But when she returned, all of her relatives had moved out to distant suburbs. At first, she stayed with an aunt in Stockton, about an hour-and-a-half drive from Oakland. Then she moved in with an uncle in Antioch, a bit closer, but still an hour outside the city. She looked for apartments and found one she liked, but the security deposit plus the first and last month's rent cost $8,000. She called 211, the nonemergency line that connects families to service programs, but got the runaround. Eventually, she ended up crashing at hotels and with friends. She reached out to Carroll Fife, the executive director of the Alliance of Californians for Community

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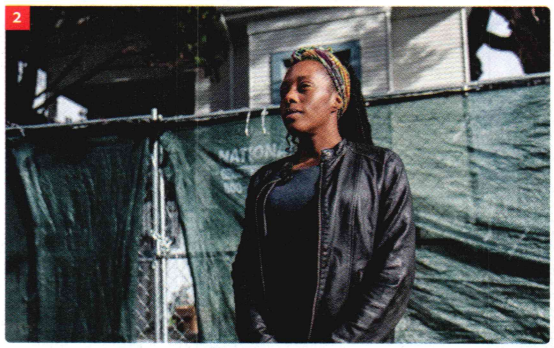
Empowerment (ACCE), for help. "I deserve to be here," she said. "They call me 'Oakland' in Mississippi."

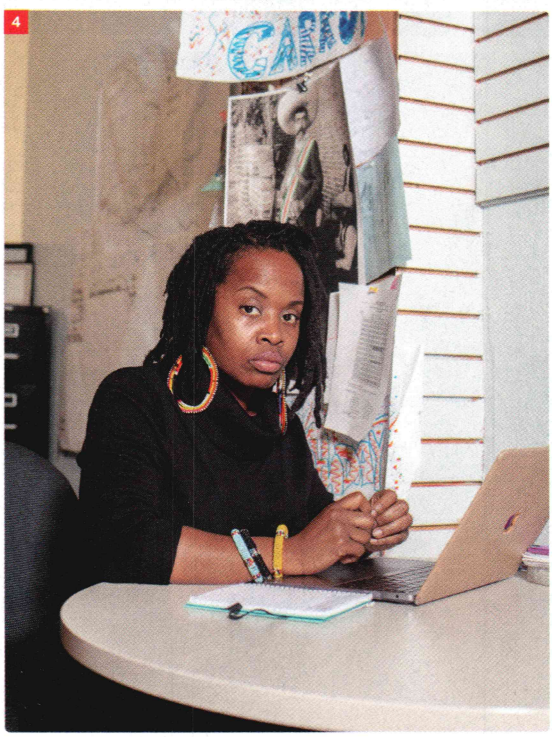
Around the same time Walker moved back to Oakland, other single mothers — mostly staff or activists in the ACCE network — had also been asking Fife for support. Tolani King, an adoptive mother to four, lost her day-care business in the recession and then lost her Section 8 housing voucher after a false arrest. She beat the case, but it ended up costing her $5,000 in legal fees. Without Section 8, King stayed with her great-aunt, but after she passed, King lost the roof over her head. Since 2018, she'd been living out of her car with her two youngest children, waking up at 5:30 a.m. to work a full-time job at the McClymonds High School breakfast program.

Misty Cross, an elder-care provider and mother to four — three daughters, ages 5, 12, and 16, and a son, age 20 — had been moving from place to place for years. When her son was just 10 months old, his father died in a car accident. Then, in 2006, Cross was shot multiple times. She died but came back to life on the operating table at Highland Hospital. She remained in intensive care for a month — a tube in her throat. She couldn't see her children, or walk, or speak. Over the years, she'd stayed with various family members and sought assistance from Section 8 and other programs. "I just felt like I was running into dead ends," she said. She tried moving out to the suburb of Vallejo for a time, but the gas, tolls, and child care added up. She eventually moved back to Oakland, where she lived in shelters and out of her car.

Fife told Walker, King, Cross, and other women, including Sameerah Karim, Merika Regan, and Sharena Thomas, the same thing: There wasn't anything affordable in Oakland — and they should get organized. The women met, formed a steering committee, started strategizing a campaign, and brainstormed a name for their group. The first one they came up with — Moms 4 Housing — stuck.

Instead of going back to school, Walker took a job creating a black housing union with ACCE. When she was out canvassing, she started noticing vacant lots and homes. On one block in West Oakland, residents pointed Walker to an eyesore, a white three-story home with pewter blue accents sandwiched between two pea-soup green houses and surrounded by overgrown bushes: 2928 Magnolia Street. Moms 4 Housing did their research and learned that the structure was one asset in the sprawling portfolio of a house-flipping company called Wedgewood.





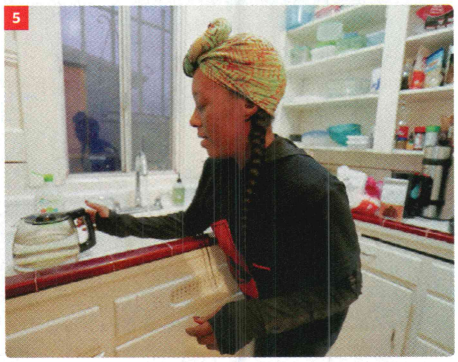
WALKER AND FIFE had been discussing the possibility of occupying a vacant unit for some time. They wanted to draw attention to the homelessness crisis — and in particular, according to Walker and other members of the movement, the theft of homes from black and brown communities by wealthy corporations. "This is a movement to recognize housing is a human right," said Walker. They knew it would require careful planning, so they sought legal advice.

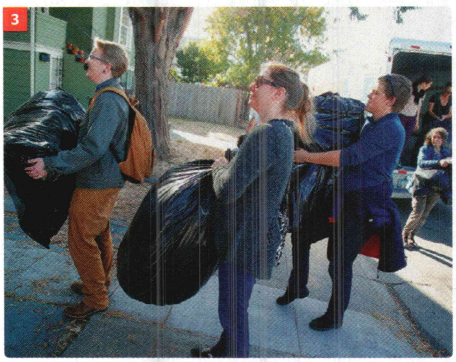
Trespassing is a misdemeanor. Housing activists who have occupied Oakland properties have been charged with conspiracy — a felony that can carry a sentence of several years in jail and tens of thousands of dollars in fines. Given these risks, the moms don't discuss how their plan developed, how the decision to move in was made, and who, specifically, made it. "There were layers set up to protect the moms from certain charges," Fife explained. Walker was also careful not to go into too much detail: "Everything was done with a specific strategy to bring awareness to corporations hoarding homes — not people, not mom and pop."

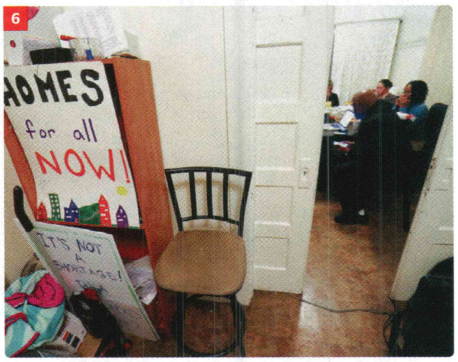
On November 18, Moms 4 Housing started moving furniture into 2928 Magnolia Street. They launched a Twitter account and a website and sent

1. Dominique Walker with her 1-year-old, Amir **2.** Walker in front of the house on Magnolia **3.** Misty Cross **4.** Carroll Fife of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment

1. DYLAN BOUSCHER/GETTY IMAGES; 2.-3. PHILIP PACHECO/GETTY IMAGES; 4. ERICA DEEMAN







a press release to local media. (Their first tweet: "Homeless moms are taking vacant properties back from real estate speculators TODAY in West Oakland. Come to West Oakland Farm Park at 11 to learn more. #Moms4Housing @ABC7 @KPIXtv @KQED @mercnews @oaktribnews @eastbayexpress @kpfa @sfchronicle".) Television cameras arrived shortly after. The @moms4housing account gained more than 1,000 followers within hours.

The group spent the first week fixing up the property, which they took to calling "Moms House." Volunteers fixed broken windows and carried furniture for the women and their children. The mothers power-washed the blue cement steps, to the delight of the neighborhood, and brought in laborers to tarp off a leaky roof and mold-infested breakfast nook. They bought and installed new appliances and a water heater. They contacted an electrician. They called in plumbers. They got a landscaper.

Walker became the primary occupant of the three-bedroom home, but it belonged to all of them. Karim moved in with her at first, but when she stepped back from the movement, Cross took her spot. Each mom had her own room. With money fundraised from supporters, Fife bought two of Cross's daughters Demi, 5, and Destiny, 12, a triple bunk bed so they could share a room with Aja. The girls posted a notice, drawn with colored pencils on their door: "GIRLS ROOM, DO NOT DISTURB." Aja celebrated her fifth birthday in Moms House. During their time there, she told a reporter she wanted to paint the outside of her new home gold "with glitter" and the inside orange because it was "Mommy's favorite color."

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1. From left: Sameerah Karim, Walker, Sharena Thomas, and Tolani King on November 18, the day the moms moved into the home **2.-3.** Supporters help carry furnishings into the house. **4.** Cross's daughters Destiny and Demi in their room in January **5.** Walker in the kitchen **6.** Walker and other community members meeting in the dining room **7.** A press conference on move-in day

1, 3. ARIC CRABB/GETTY IMAGES; 2. @MOMS4HOUSING; 4.-6. JANE TYSKA/GETTY IMAGES; 7. NICOLE DEANE

A REAL ESTATE DEVELOPER

DRESSED UP AS AN ELF

AND WEARING A "MAKE OAKLAND GREAT AGAIN" HAT ATTEMPTED TO SHOOT $1,000 OUT OF A

LEAF BLOWER

INTO A HOMELESS CAMP TO COAX THE RESIDENTS TO RELOCATE.

"They were always smiling and running around and being free," Walker said of the kids. "And that's how all parents want their children to be — just to be children and to have some sort of stability and everyday structured environment where it's not changing every single night."

The moms placed a donated couch in the living room, which they designated a shoe-free "Baby Zone." Amir would crawl around the space, latch onto the couch, and try to stand himself up. He took his first steps in the Baby Zone and spoke his first words in the house. When the holidays came, the moms got a tree — something you can't do in a shelter, hotel, or car. "Our kids started to open up a little bit more, started to smile a little bit more, started to talk a little bit more," Cross said. "It was just regular. It just worked."

The group held strategy meetings, discussing everything from their vision for the organization to how they could support one another and make sure the children were happy. They usually met in the Baby Zone, but the heating didn't work, so they convened in whichever spot was warmest. Even though the moms worked multiple jobs, they'd sometimes sit down and share a meal. "We all became a family," Walker said.

Moms House was usually full, with supporters coming and going. "I think for a lot of people, it was like a community center," said April Thomas, the group's communications coordinator. "I always felt lucky to be there." But sometimes the traffic overwhelmed the mothers. Reporters with cameras would knock on the door late at night. The group never knew when or if the police might arrive. Supporters took security shifts to keep them safe. Tur-Ha Ak, who worked security for the group, said a strange van came by a few times to scope out the house. One night, according to Ak, two men broke into the garage and stole some things stashed there.

Every few days, the group held a press conference at Moms House. From the start, Moms 4 Housing understood that the press could make or break the movement. They needed journalists to see them as dedicated mothers working multiple jobs. Instead of debating the wonky details of housing and homelessness policy, they needed to tell a simple, visceral story about children living on the street while family homes owned by corporations sat empty. "There are four times as many empty homes in Oakland as there are homeless people," Karim said at a press conference held outside the home in November. "Why should anyone, especially children, sleep on the street?"

In December, Moms 4 Housing learned that Wedgewood Properties had contracted Sam Singer, president of a public relations firm who advertises himself as a "master spin doctor" and "top gun for hire." Singer has worked with many corporate clients — Visa, Ford, Disney — and he once helped craft a communications strategy that portrayed a $19 billion pollution fine levied by an Ecuadorian court against Chevron as fraudulent and corrupt. The oil company eventually won a $96 million countersuit against the Ecuadorian government. "A reporter once told me that Sam Singer is known as the guy you go to when you're in really deep s---," Thomas told me. That month, Walker received an eviction notice.

"CARROLL, WE JUST HEARD that there was a text that says the sheriff is knocking on the door and saying people have to clear out. Is that your understanding, as we're speaking?" Amy Goodman, host of the independent news program *Democracy Now!*, interrupted Fife during a live interview on the morning of January 14. "Oh, OK, yeah, I think we gotta go," Fife replied. She and Walker, who was also in the studio for the interview, removed their earpieces and microphones, cameras still rolling. Behind the scenes, Tur-Ha Ak hustled the women off set. They hopped into his car and sped toward Magnolia Street.

The day before, more than 300 supporters had gathered on the sidewalk in front of Moms House with signs

and flowers, locking arms and singing songs late into the evening. It was a diverse crowd, the majority of whom were women. At one point, two children no older than 10 led a call and response that went: "Whose house?" "Moms House!" Fred Hampton Jr., son of the Black Panther Party leader killed by Chicago police in 1969, flew out to show his support (in Illinois, there's an ongoing campaign to save Hampton Sr.'s childhood home, which was recently repossessed and is currently slated for auction). That night, in anticipation of an eviction, the moms stayed up. Cross didn't eat. "We had to have talks with our kids about what was about to happen," Cross said. They made plans for their children to sleep somewhere safe with family or friends. "No mother should have to have those kinds of conversations with their kids."

At 5 a.m. the next day, just as Walker went live on *Democracy Now!*, dozens of Alameda County sheriff's deputies showed up with the armored vehicle, wielding assault rifles and a battering ram. They blocked off Magnolia Street with yellow tape and approached Moms House. A notice posted on the front door stated that the moms were participating in a nonviolent act of civil disobedience and that the women would not resist arrest but would remain where they were.

"Sheriff's office! If you refuse to leave, you will be arrested for violation of a court order and obstruction of justice," one of the sheriff's deputies announced when he reached the door. *Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!* His knocks could be heard all the way down the block. "Sheriff's office!"

The officers understood the sensitivity of the situation, according to its spokesperson, Sergeant Ray Kelly, and had reached out to Moms 4 Housing prior to the eviction to persuade the women to leave the home. But the moms were intent on staying, and according to Kelly, the department was also concerned that anarchist groups on the periphery of the movement might be looking for a confrontation. The weapons, armored vehicle, and tactical gear were meant to prepare officers for a worst-case scenario. "The optics on that were never going

to be good," Kelly said. "We wanted nothing to do with this, but we have an obligation as the sheriff's office to enforce the eviction order."

Cross, dressed in a green hoodie with a quilted design on her chest in the shape of the continent of Africa, and King, bundled up in a winter jacket with the hood up, retreated upstairs, passing two posters: one that read, "Housing For All," and another, "Moms 4 Housing #SaveMomsHouse." When the moms and their supporters refused to walk out, officers took a battering ram to the door, which had no lock and had been secured with a two-by-four for weeks. "It's Alameda County Sheriff's Office. We're here for an eviction. Anybody inside the residence please come to the front door." Cross went back downstairs, took a seat on the couch, and started broadcasting on Facebook Live as the deputies broke down the door to that room — which was unlocked, according to the moms. "It's a lot of force," she said to her followers watching online. "I've never seen this happen before."

"We're trying not to arrest anybody," an officer in body armor said to the women. "If you guys would like to leave now, this is your last chance to leave before we place you under arrest." He paused for a response. "Are you guys refusing to leave? You guys want to be arrested instead of just walking out peacefully?" The women remained seated and silent. "Start bringing the bodies in and start picking them off," he said, directing three officers beside him.

"We don't want to arrest you," one of his partners, a man in a cap and tactical glasses, said.

"We don't want to be homeless," King replied. "I'm trying to comb my baby's hair for school. It's nowhere for me to go."

As the officers led King and Cross through the battered door and onto the porch, the mothers saw a crowd of supporters gathered at the end of the block. The crowd broke into the chant from the night before: "Whose house?" "Moms House!" "Whose house?" "Moms House!"

"What happens next, Misty?" a journalist asked Cross.

"What happens next is the movement," she said. "We only a piece of it. We'll be back. We'll be right back."

That week, through their attorneys, Moms 4 Housing made an agreement with Wedgewood that the women would be allowed to return to the house to get their things. But in the days after police carried out the eviction, Wedgewood didn't honor the agreement, according to Moms 4 Housing. They say the company took their furnishings, housewares, clothes, and other belongings — the triple bunk, Baby Zone couch, tutus, princess costumes — stuffed what they could into garbage bags, and threw them onto the street. Singer, Wedgewood's spokesperson, didn't address this claim but wrote via email, "Throughout the process, Wedgewood did the right thing.... Wedgewood is sympathetic to the plight of the homeless and is a major contributor to shelter programs, inner-city youth, and the disadvantaged. The company hears what the individuals who were illegally squatting at the Magnolia Street home are saying — but it does not respect nor does it condone the theft of its property."

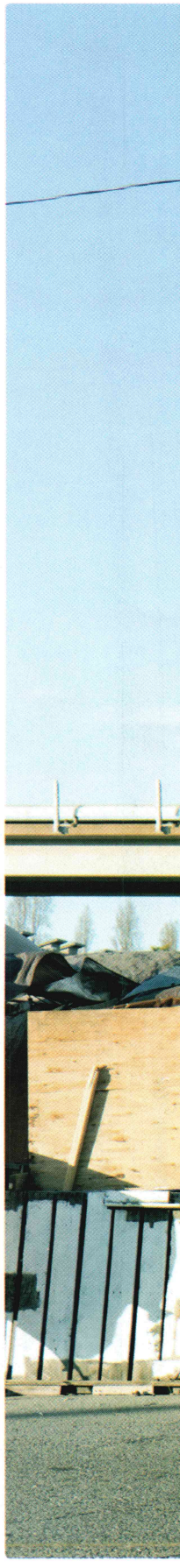
When the moms came to collect what remained, the triple bunk had been dismantled in such a way that it could not be put back together.

IN A 2015 presentation at the Advantage Real Estate Forum in Boca Raton, Florida, Wedgewood CEO Gregory Geiser described distressed housing markets as "hot and sexy." Wedgewood owned 98 shell companies, 31 of which operated in the Bay Area, holding at least 125 properties, according to an investigation by a local NBC affiliate. The company had a Monopoly game board, which was rebranded "Wedgewood," affixed to the wall of its headquarters in Redondo Beach, California.

When I visited Moms House, the windows, doors, and garage were boarded up. The black tarp covering the leaky roof flapped in the breeze. A chain-link fence had been erected around the perimeter. Someone had used a tomato can to prop up a sign that read:

"Black Motherhood
Is Sacred.
Black Childhood
Is Precious.
Moms 4 Housing <3"

DOZENS OF SHERIFF'S **DEPUTIES** SHOWED UP WITH THE **ARMORED VEHICLE,** WIELDING **ASSAULT RIFLES** AND A BATTERING RAM. THEY BLOCKED OFF MAGNOLIA STREET WITH YELLOW TAPE AND APPROACHED MOMS HOUSE.



NO BODY IN
THE WORLD
NO BODY IN HISTORY
HAS EVER GOTTEN
THEIR FREEDOM BY
APPEALING TO THE
MORAL SENSE OF
THE PEOPLE WHO
WERE OPPRESSING
THEM
BY: ASSATA SHAKUR
THE HOMELESS
ISSUES OR ARE
THE HOMELESS
THE
ISSUE?

I AM NOT HOMELESS I AMA CSC CURB SIDE CITIZEN
NO STATE SHALL MAKE OR ENFORCE ANY LAW WHICH ABRIDGE THE PRIVILEGES OF A US CITIZEN OR DEPRIVE ANY CITIZEN OF LIFE LIBERTY PROPERTY NOR DENYS EQUAL PROTECTION OF THE LAW

A homeless encampment in West Oakland

Just across the street from Moms House is a blue-gray home renovated with raw-lumber fencing next to a small, one-story bungalow with bars over its windows. Down the block, a "For Sale" sign advertises a teal property with a stone-and-pebble walkway and a baby palm tree in the front yard. Across the street from that house sits a two-story complex with a "BEWARE OF DOG" sign pinned to the fence. Beside it, an empty lot.

After the eviction, Walker found housing at an apartment building owned by the Northern California Land Trust on Tenth Street in South Berkeley. When the apartment's prior landlord tried to sell the building, the tenants, mostly older black residents on fixed incomes who would have lost their housing if the deal had gone through, organized. They purchased the complex with support from the land trust, a nonprofit legal structure that keeps housing affordable by placing limits on the resale value of units while retaining ownership of the land. Moms 4 Housing had discussed doing the same with Moms House.

When the eviction made national headlines, Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf reached out to Gregory Geiser, head of Wedgewood, to make a deal. A week before their eviction, the moms had confronted the Oakland mayor at a press conference. The mayor described the encounter as "intense" and "raw." "I could just feel how much trauma these mothers have been through," she said. The mayor did not use her Oakland Police Department to remove the women or assist Alameda County with the eviction. But the moms still felt that Schaaf didn't help them until the national media forced her hand.

Under that increased scrutiny, Schaaf and Geiser began negotiating the transfer of 2928 Magnolia Street to the Oakland Community Land Trust, with the intention of making Moms House available and affordable for the mothers. Wedgewood also indicated that the company was open to adding a right of first refusal onto some of its other properties in Oakland, which would allow existing tenants to purchase their units at the asking price when they went up for sale. Meanwhile, the Alameda County District Attorney's Office dropped the charges against the moms. "Pressure bursts pipes," Walker said of these victories. "That's what happens when we come together."

Lawmakers seemed emboldened, too. Two weeks after the eviction, Oakland City Councilmember Nikki Bas announced the Moms 4 Housing Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, which would give renters the first right to buy if their home went up for sale. An addition to the bill would provide community land trusts, co-ops, and affordable-housing developers the first right to purchase vacant homes and buildings — a measure intended to protect property from speculation. The same day, Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib introduced a slate of seven sweeping housing bills in Congress, branded the "People's Housing Platform," which aim to tackle homelessness, public housing, and tenant rights, among other issues.

"Did you guys hear about Moms 4 Housing?" ACCE representative Vanessa Bulnes asked the crowd at the Capitol Hill press conference announcing the package. The crowd cheered. "That's what it's going to take. It's going to take radical action and changes like that to get the community talking about it."

Schaaf acknowledges that "institutionalized racism has played a huge role in the housing crisis and the disproportionate impact on African Americans," meaning that "if you are white, you are more than twice as likely to own a home than if you are black." The city recently passed a law banning criminal background checks for potential tenants because they discriminate against formerly incarcerated people. The mayor also touts the Keep Oakland Housed initiative, designed to help families at risk of displacement remain in the city. "I

"I'M STILL

SLEEPING IN A CAR.

EVERYONE SAYS THEY WANT TO HELP, BUT

NO ONE IN POWER IS WILLING TO

"CHALLENGE THE SYSTEMS THAT FORCED MY FAMILY INTO HOMELESSNESS."

am hair-on-fire about putting a ballot initiative on the California ballot in November to create a constitutional amendment to mandate the government work to end homelessness," the mayor told me. Schaaf supports the goal of making housing a human right but expressed concern that a rights-based framework didn't resonate as well as other ways of addressing the issue, based on preliminary feedback from focus groups. "The devil is in the details," she said.

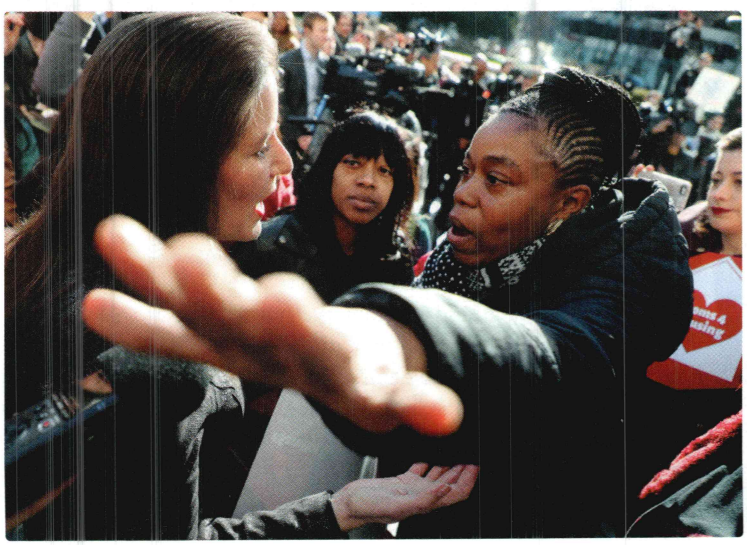
Then the details started falling apart. Wedgewood insisted on a price nearly $90,000 higher than the appraisal offered by the land trust and the value at which the corporation purchased the property just six months earlier. Moms 4 Housing balked at the offer and does not believe the corporation should turn a profit on the home. Wedgewood still owns Moms House.

WITHOUT THE house on Magnolia, Cross and King are back on the street. King still gets up at 5:30 to serve breakfast at McClymonds, and on holidays, when she doesn't have work and her kids are out of school, she drives around aimlessly. One night, she drove the family around town until sunrise because she didn't have anywhere else to go. "I've been sold this lie of the American dream. I've worked hard, hard, and harder my whole life. I deserve a good life here in my hometown of Oakland," King said. "Even after what we've done with Moms 4 Housing, my family is still struggling. I'm still sleeping in a car. Everyone says they want to help, but no one in power is willing to challenge the systems that forced my family into homelessness."

On an evening in January, I met Cross in downtown Oakland, and she led the way to Bento House, where she occasionally gets lunch. I explained I wasn't going to eat because my mom was cooking dinner. "And you better not ruin that appetite," Cross responded, "because it's a sign of disrespect when you don't eat when we cook, I'm telling you." I laughed. "I wish my son would not come into my house and not eat, because I'm sure gonna have a fit. Even if he gets married, I'm still gonna get jealous: 'What do you mean you're full? Just eat some more. You can't be full,'" she continued. "That's what's keeping me moving, is my kids."

A week before the eviction, the father of Cross's three daughters died. During the Moms 4 Housing media frenzy, she wore sunglasses to most rallies and press conferences. "I was just there, existing," she said. "I've been getting dealt the hard hand from the beginning."

With her children, Cross lives out of her car and sleeps in a shelter for battered women in Alameda, a city bordering Oakland. They have an 8 o'clock curfew and have to sign up for laundry and showers. They're cautious



LEFT King with Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf. The group confronted the mayor during a press conference a week before their eviction.

OPPOSITE Cross with two of her daughters in front of a luxury apartment building under construction in Oakland

ARIC CRABB/GETTY IMAGES

around other residents, some of whom suffer from mental illness. When I asked what that's like, Cross said, "S---, like jail. You have to wake up when they tell you to. You have chores. You have to eat when they feed you — or you don't eat. When you sleep in the dorm, they walk by to patrol. You're not at your own will. You've got a curfew. You have to get permission if you want to stay out on weekends." After being displaced so many times, Cross has become numb to it all.

But as she picked at her salad, her mood shifted. "A lot of family members died in these streets from guns," she said, referring to the 2006 shooting that nearly took her life. "Maybe God kept me here for a reason. Maybe he kept me in this position that he did so that I can, I don't know, do this work?" Cross wants Moms 4 Housing to put forward a California ballot initiative to make housing a human right, but there isn't consensus around that strategy yet.

About an hour into dinner, Cross checked her watch. Curfew was approaching, and it was time to get back to her kids. She got a to-go box for her leftover chicken and sushi. "There's a lot of our people out there that want to tell their story," she said, standing on the sidewalk beside her car. "We just opened up that pathway for them not to be judged, not to feel embarrassed about that."

Then she pointed at the sedan. "Like, we work! Do this look like I'm homeless? But if I open up my trunk, you would be like, 'Whoa, lady.' Everything is in here. But yeah, no one will ever know the path you walked until you tell your story. I tell mine because I was at that point where I couldn't talk. So for me to have a voice? I'll give it my all, and that's just it."

JULIAN BRAVE NOISECAT is a fellow of the Type Media Center and vice president of policy and strategy at Data for Progress.

ERICA DEEMAN is a San Francisco–based photographer. This summer, her work will be exhibited in the group show *Looking Forward: Ten Years of Pier 24 Photography* in San Francisco.

SNAKE PERSON

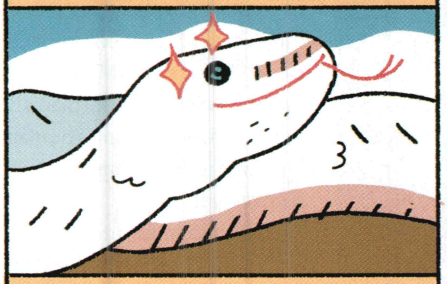
Kelsey Wroten

I've never been a dog person. I've always thought, psychologically, people who got dogs were looking for something they couldn't find in other people.

Unconditional love, someone waiting for them when they got home, or someone way out of their league who inexplicably adored them.

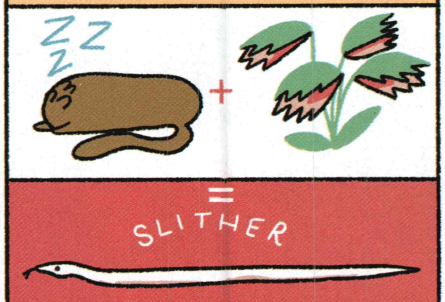
It all struck me as a little weird.

So when I decided to get a pet last summer, I wanted to go as far away from a dog as possible.

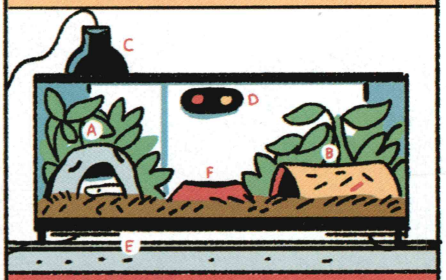


A ball python.

Imagine the laziest cat you ever met and remove its legs. Now add a carnivorous plant. That's what a ball python is like.

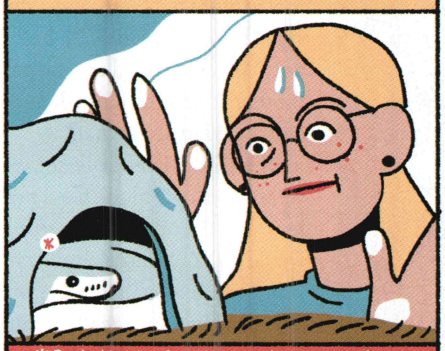


I did all the research and knew what to expect. I put him in his new tank, and he slithered into a hide immediately. He was good. Right?



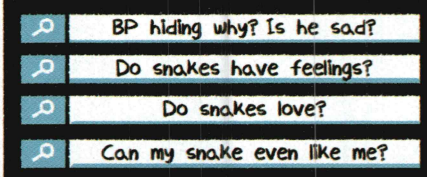
A. Hot Hide. B. Cool Hide. C. Heat Lamp. D. Thermostat. E. Under Tank Heater. F. Water.

That's when the panic set in.



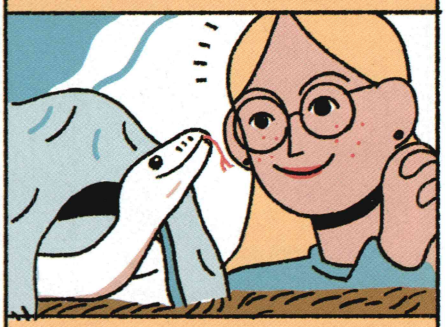
*Probably sleeping. He doesn't have eyelids, so you can't tell.

My search history revealed my anxiety.



I felt like I had an obsessive crush who I desperately wanted to notice me but couldn't talk to. I needed to chill out.

Then a week later, he emerged. Totally fine and ready to explore.

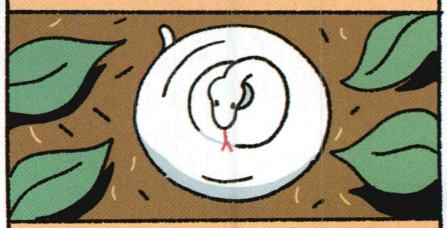


I had an epiphany.

Ball pythons are slow-moving introverts. I am too, at heart. But the general urgency of life often makes me ignore that.

I had, in spite of myself, gotten a pet that was a symbol of something else for me. He focused on his needs instinctively instead of allowing any outside pressure to influence him.

When confronted with change he couldn't control, he didn't frantically look for an answer like I did. He chose to sit with the feeling and ride it out until he was ready.



There is a reason why ball pythons can live to be 30 years old. They pace themselves.

It's good to slow down even when the world seems to be running at breakneck speed.

People get dogs seeking love from another. I got a snake to discover love for myself.

Every can has a story. Good beer for everyone.

fortpointbeer.com

The Chaîne d'ancre link
reworked in Barénia calfskin.

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